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Learning to Fear Honey:

A Family Memoir of the Holocaust

Lenka Berlin, Esther Berkovic, and Olga Blank

as told to

Gail Berlin

LEARNING TO FEAR HONEY

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Dedicated to

Erno and Tibi Berkovic,

aged thirteen and fourteen,

who were killed during the Holocaust

and to the million and a half murdered children

whose stories no one knows.

PREFACE

Philadelphia

Dec. 30, 2000

Interview between Lenka Berkovic Berlin, survivor of Auschwitz, and her daughter, Gail Berlin.

My mother and I sit together at the kitchen table. As we talk, she works patiently on lengthening her grandson's pants.

"So, Mom. People need to know why I'm writing this memoir down instead of you. You're the survivor. Why didn't you write it?"

"I tried a few times. In my college English class, I did write one story down. But then I had nightmares. I was afraid of getting the nightmares back again. I always dreamed about my brothers, and the dream was always same, how the Nazis were going to kill them. If I talk, I can talk in drips and drabs. I don't have to go back to the beginning. I don't have to relive it."

"Yet you never talked to anyone about it beyond the family."

"I didn't want to talk about it. After the war, I overheard people say, 'Ooooooooooooooo, I met a survivor. She just could not stop talking about the Holocaust. She must be making it up. She must be crazy.' At that time, 'survivor' didn't mean what it means today. It meant you had to be strong, and you must have stepped on someone to have survived. You survived. You must have done something. You must have guilt feelings. I had no survivor guilt feelings, so I didn't want to talk about it.

But I always wanted it to be known how accidental survival can be. It didn't mean you

had more food or more friends in high places. Today, though, I discovered we did have something that helped us survive: Mother. In Auschwitz, I discovered what a mother is. I think perhaps the kapos didn't hurt us because Mother was there. She starved herself to feed us. I've heard stories about how survivors turned on each other, how sons took bread from fathers. But for me, it wasn't so.

As soon as you became an English major I thought, 'Now the story will be written properly.'"

"When did you decide that the story should be written down?"

"Even in Auschwitz, I thought, if I die, this has to be known, my father in America has to know it. He and his gun would straighten up the whole world for me. And I didn't want to die without anybody knowing what had happened. And the hunger. The comprehension of what hunger is did not register with people in America. If only I could some way tell people about what hunger is like. It's not just rationed butter. People here just didn't understand what we had gone through. Right after the war, I heard one person say, 'It's natural for a country to imprison enemy aliens during times of war.' Enemy aliens. How is a child an enemy alien? Nobody thought about the children. Later, the more Holocaust denials came out, the more I thought I was doing an injustice by not writing the story down, and I owe it to my brothers and to history so it won't repeat itself. It has to be known."

* * * * * * *

Philadelphia

Dec. 30, 2000

Phone interview between Olga Berkovic Blank and her niece, Gail Berlin. Outside, snow is blowing.

"Hello, Aunt Olga."

"Hello, dear. Did you speak with your mother about why she didn't write?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She said it brought back the nightmares. She also said it had to be told because people didn't understand what you went through."

"It's true. Do you know that after the war someone actually told me that any Jewish woman who survived the war had to be a whore. I gave him a piece of my mind."

"Aunt Olga, why haven't you written down your experiences during the Holocaust yourself?"

"I kept promising to my children that I would. Every time I would start, it would bring back painful memories. I didn't want to go through with it. Michele and Robin even bought me a diary to write in. It's just too painful. Right now, it's still too fresh to sit and write about it. Maybe in another fifty years I could write about it."

"Why do you believe the story should be written?"

"Because people don't believe it. Each of us who went through the Holocaust had different experiences, different feelings, different places, different times. If someone doesn't write

it, people will think it could have been made up. It should be written down so generations coming will know and history should not repeat itself. The Germans wanted to destroy us, physically, mentally, and emotionally. And the unpredictability! This time you do not know that right is wrong and left is right. In Auschwitz, I was hoping and praying they would not succeed. Not praying. Wishing. It was hard to pray in Auschwitz. In Auschwitz we said we must survive. They could not kill everybody and nobody know what they did. But I didn't think about writing then. I have enough nightmares without it.

I'm delighted that somebody in the family had the strength to write it. If I live to be a hundred, I might write it. But there's no guarantee your mind will be okay at one-hundred! Probably, I would not personally have written it down. Mother lived to be one-hundred. Her secret was that she was able to leave the past behind and not let it destroy her. You really cannot live in the past. You can't eat, sleep -- every minute of the day -- the horrors that you lived through."

Part I: Storytelling

The Baby

I sat across the dining room table from my grandmother, a ninety-eight year old woman who can sit enthroned on a folding chair. Elegant, every hair in place. A string of pearls. Europe sitting in Philadelphia. Between us sat tea cups, slices of lemon on a china saucer, a bowl of cantaloupe with strawberries, bow-tie cookies, and three-quarters of a cake with chocolate shavings on top -- the usual aftermath of a family meal prepared in a ritual of love by my mother.

"So, Grandmother, you read my book."

"I read your book, Gail." She had examined my first sketchy draft -- xeroxed and spiral bound -- of our family's experiences during the Holocaust,

"Did you like it?"

"I liked it very much. Until three in the morning I read it."

"Really?"

"Yes. I had nightmares for three nights."

"Three nights . . ."

"It was very good."

"Was it accurate?"

"Yes, yes, except Gail, you got it all wrong."

"It's all wrong? Which part was wrong?"

"The story about the baby."

I had always loved the story about the baby. True, it had nothing to do with the Holocaust, just a family story, but I couldn't bear to leave it out. Mixed in with tales of hunger, ice, trains, and survival, Mother had told me this story often as I grew up:

> A baby in a basket had been left on the doorstep of her great-grandparents' home, a Christian baby. They took the little girl in and raised her with their own children. But while they raised their own children as Jews, the little girl was brought up as a Christian and sent to church every Sunday.

Now, for the first time, I would hear my grandmother, Esther Berkovic, tell this beloved tale:

"You know, Gail, in those days, during the time of my great-grandparents, they believed in witches."

"Yes?"

"And in the summer, everyone cooked outdoors, but in the winter, they had a great fire in the center of the room. By my parents' time, the houses were like houses today: they had rooms, but then there was only one large room, and in the winter a fire burned in the center. The servants slept all around the fire on wooden benches. Only the master of the house had a bed."

"Ah."

"One night, they heard a cry outside the door. Everyone thought it was a witch and grabbed whatever could be found -- axe handles, rakes, shovels -- and went together to the door. One man opened the door and looked out. There in a basket was a baby. The child, they

discovered, was Christian and they raised him as a Christian. His name was Misha. He was like a brother to my grandfather. They called each other "brother," but Misha shaved and went to church, while my grandfather had a great beard, like all the Jewish men. I remember Misha spoke a very good Yiddish. On the Sabbath, he chased me away from the sugar."

"So it was a boy, and your great-grandparents raised him."

"Yes. The rest of your book though is fine."

"Good . . . good . . ."

"I had nightmares for three nights."

"Good . . ."

* * * * *

I remember the first time I realized my mother was a person. I was very young. Mother seemed extraordinary to me, supernatural, precious, and locked in a category all of her own. There was the whole of the human race, and then there was Mother. As she held me in her arms one day, I looked around at the other people standing about chatting with her and suddenly realized: She was a person, too! Just another ordinary person! This was a jolt, perhaps my first attempt to align perception and reality. Later on came another jolt: It was not the case that all grandmothers in America had foreign accents. But the really big jolt hit one Passover when I was perhaps four years old. I sat with my chin just above a long aluminum table covered with a white cloth and white, gold-rimmed dishes and listened as my three aunts, who looked alike but had

different names, chatted with my mother above my head. I had little way to distinguish my mother's three older sisters, Ilona, Margi, and Olga -- all with the same lilting accents, all with the same oval faces and high cheekbones, each married to a man named Irv. They spoke of an Erno and a Tibi. I turned to my mother.

"Who are Erno and Tibi?"

"My brothers."

"Why aren't they here?" It was Passover. Everyone was supposed to be there, crammed around a single table while Grandpop rattled through the service in his lightening-quick Ashkenazi Hebrew and his wife hissed, "Shorter, Adolf, make it shorter. The children."

What did Mother say? How does one explain the Holocaust to a four-year-old? She believed, though, that if you were old enough to ask a question, you were old enough to get an answer.

"They were my brothers, thirteen and fifteen years old. They died during the war. The Nazis killed them. Don't worry. That won't happen here. You're fine."

Perhaps that was the beginning. I remember no time when I didn't already know about the Holocaust. I learned the tale of our survival one puzzle piece at a time. Then one day, Mother turned to me:

"I'm going to give you my story. You can write it any way you like. It will be yours to tell."

Years later, I sat down and dutifully tried to write my mother's story for her, pumping out draft after draft of Holocaust events, but finally I discovered that I couldn't do it. Mom might give me the story, but it wasn't mine and never would be. I never lived it. I'm not a survivor. I could only set down what was, in fact, my own experience: listening to my mother's voice telling the story. Over the years, I discovered that my mother, my Aunt, and my grandmother might not always remember details in exactly the same way. Mom always uses the Hungarian names of towns; Olga the Czech. Mom and Olga viewed events through the eyes of teenagers; grandmother, through the forty-five-year-old eyes of a mother of six. For my mother and grandmother in particular, memories of water in Auschwitz differ.

Water

"You know, Gail, about one thing I was always sorry."

"What was that, Grandmother?"

"About the water." I look up from my plate of chicken soup with noodles, which I am eating with an enormous soup spoon, the kind my grandfather preferred. When Grandmother was younger, she would have made the fine noodles by hand, from scratch.

"We were in Auschwitz. It was very hard to get water. They let us into the barrack where the water was only twice a day for maybe five, ten minutes, for all those women. If you were not away from the spigots by the time the guard yelled, "Out!" you were beaten. I ran for water with my bowl. Three, four women tried to take it away from me. The people were like animals; they weren't human beings anymore. When you fight for life, you fight."

"Once, the daughter of a dear friend ran to me to ask for water. 'Aunt Estike, Aunt Estike, please a little bit of water!' If I take off the hands and give her the water, lots of people would run over me, Jews who were there to fight for life. I carried the water like this. (She extended both arms straight above her head to show me.) With the water, I walked that way. Nobody can take away from me the water."

"I never give the water to this child. About this I am still very sorry."

This is the only story of the camps that she has told me more than once.

Several years later, I visit with Grandmother before traveling for the first time to Poland to see Auschwitz-Birkenau. I sit with her as she lies uncomfortably in a hospital bed. She is ninety-eight and has never been in a hospital before. Her meal is not kosher, and she leaves it untouched. Various daughters and granddaughters, hearing that she will not eat, prepare chicken soup for her and carry it to the hospital in jars marked, "KOSHER. FOR ESTHER BERKOVIC" in big block letters. I bring stuffed cabbages, the first I have ever made, prepared from her own recipe.

"Gail, these taste very good. The seasonings are just right, just the right amount of paprika. But, Gail, they are not cooked."

"I'll cook them again, Grandmom."

"Yes, cook it again. Add a can of tomato sauce, you'll see how good it is. Gail, you are going to visit Auschwitz, to see for yourself. I will tell you a story. When we were there in Auschwitz, Olga was very sick. She had a big fever. So I went at night and crawled like a dog along the ground to the barrack what had the water. The guard was in the tower, and I think, if I look like a dog, he will not notice me. In the washroom I took off all my clothes and soaked them

in water. Then, I crawled back naked with the wet clothes. I put them all on Olga. She was so hot that they were dry by morning and I could put them on again. This you should know."

"How did you feel when you were in Birkenau, Grandmother?"

"I was busy."

When I stood myself in C-lager, the Hungarian women's camp in Birkenau where my grandmother, mother, and aunt had been imprisoned, I looked for the spot where my grandmother crawled. The outline of the barrack (number 31) remains, concrete curbs surrounding piles of brick and crumbling spikes of chimneys. The washroom's contours are visible as well. A hut on spindly wooden legs -- the guard's tower -- still stands there, intact, by the barbed wire. If she uses the door on the right, closer to the crematoria, the guard will have a harder time seeing her. She will have to cross an ample open space, between the barrack and the washroom. Grass grows there now where she crawled naked on bare earth.

But who can imagine one's own grandmother naked and crawling? I can more easily imagine her as she appears in a tale of her youth, sprung upon me at the end of a phone conversation.

"Good-bye, Gail."

"Good-bye, Grandmother."

"Be good. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Okay, Grandmother."

"That means that you can ride on a horse naked at midnight."

"I can? You did that?"

"Yes. I never used a saddle. My hair hung around my waist. It was longer than yours."

When I tell my mother, Lenka, the story of the little girl who wanted water, she is enraged.

"Not true. It never happened like that. There was plenty of water. I drank whenever I wanted. The barrack with the water was right next door to us. If there was someone who wanted water, Mother could say, 'Get it yourself. The barrack is right there.' She did nothing; I was the one who did things. Mother was like a zombie, she just sat and stared, too scared to do anything. When we saw the boys for the last time, there at the gate of C-lager, she was afraid to go up to them. I was the one who said, 'It's alright, Mother, no one is looking now. Go and kiss them.' I was the one who got more food."

"Mom, you are the only person in Auschwitz I have ever heard of who had plenty of water."

"The way Grandmother tells it is not the way it was," she insists.

It seems that mothers and daughters may live in the same space, but in different worlds. My mother's Auschwitz had water; her mother's did not. But I find no real contradiction between the two versions. Grandmother was right; water was scarce in Auschwitz. Mom was right, too. With a protective mother, a kind kapo, and a washroom nearby, she had no trouble getting any. She was lucky.

"In Birkenau, the prisoners, especially the women, suffered from chronic shortage and poor quality of water." (Israel Gutman, p. 25 in Anatomy of the Auschwitz

Death Camp)

Birkenau was built in a swamp. The Nazis never considered a sound sewage system or clean water a priority for the prisoners kept there. In BIIc, the official designation for C-lager, as in other sections of BII, there were only two washrooms available for the inmates, approximately thirty-two thousand women per lager. Prisoners were permitted to enter these washrooms only at specified times. A third part of Birkenau known as BIII or "Mexico" was also used for Hungarian women. This section, never entirely completed, had no washrooms or water at all. Another survivor, Livia Bitton Jackson, newly arrived in a section of Birkenau still under construction, asked her cousins about water:

There is no water in this camp, they say. We get black coffee in the evening. During the day we drink from the lake in the camp.

"Lake? Where is it?"

[She is led] to a puddle, a fairly large hollow in the ground filled with murky water. It has an unpleasant odor.

"To drink from this? It's putrefied! It stinks!" I look at my cousins with horror.

"You drank from this?"

"We all did. There is nothing else. If you are thirsty enough you don't care."

(Elli p. 65)

Mom's stories flow one to the next, like river water striking rocks. She may pour out a string of stories in response to a question, or tell me everything she can remember about one particular subject, such as food or fear. Or she may tell me everything that happened in one particular place.

The Gate

"That is the most horrible place in the world." Mother is looking at a snapshot I have taken of the black iron gate that leads into C-lager. We are seated in one of our favorite Italian restaurants, finishing coffee, tiramisu, and spumoni.

"That's where the woman screamed after we had our hair cut on the first day, 'What have you done to my hair? What have you done to my beautiful blond hair?' They took her away and shot her. That's where I saw my brothers for the last time. They had them for a short while there in C-lager. Mother said, 'Oh, my God, Tibi, what a huge shirt you have.' The ends of the sleeves hung down below his fingers. He was always so little. He said, 'Don't worry, Mother, I'll cut them off and use them for handkerchiefs.' He had a nose that ran more often than not. We never saw the boys again after that. I dreamed about them every night, and as long as I dreamed about them, I knew they were safe. A little before the war ended, the dreams stopped.

"There was a terrible selection by this gate. Mothers were made to kneel down. A man pointed at them, and they had to kneel. Dogs were there on leash, barking. Screaming. Then the daughters were taken and dragged away from them. If a mother tried to get up, she was beaten down. If the girls tried to rejoin the mothers, they were driven back by kapos with sticks. The

kapos knew the mothers would be taken out. They were saving the daughters. Removal meant death, but I didn't know that then. Such a chaos. Girls screaming, mothers screaming, everybody trying to run away from the gate."

"Wait. Wait. Where were you while all this was happening?"

"I was right there."

"How close?"

"As close as you are to that woman." She points to the woman seated behind me at an adjacent table in the restaurant. We are seated no more than a foot apart, back to back. In the past when I had heard this story, it had always seemed to me that Mother was watching safely from a distance as the scene unfolded in silence.

"Then how did you avoid this selection?"

"We ran. There were thousands of women there, thousands. We just melted into the crowd. Take one step to the side and -- whoops! -- you're gone. Besides, neither Olga nor I look like mother. That saved us. Ten, maybe fifteen mothers were selected out that day."

I feel oddly pleased that I, too, look nothing like my mother, although this attribute can neither help nor harm me here in the Italian restaurant.

> *Selections in C-lager were conducted by both SS men and women. Dr. Mengele often carried out selections there along with the beautiful but vicious SS overseer of women, Irma Grese, in charge of C-lager from May 1944 to January 1945. Grese was famed among the prisoners for being scrupulously dressed-- uniforms tailored to accentuate her figure, boots always shining. A sumptuous blond with*

an angelic face, Grese is reported to have been enraged by family members who tried to remain together in C-lager. She preferred to separate mothers from daughters and sisters from sisters. One survivor recounts that when selections for labor transports were made, Grese, seeing mothers and daughters attempting to stay together, would "beat them until they were unconscious and leave them lying on the ground." (qtd in Brown The Beautiful Beast 51) Irma Grese was twenty years old when she reigned in C-lager.

"That first night in C-lager, we slept in a barrack right near the gate. Then something happened that Mother didn't like. We were in a bunk near the little room partitioned off for the blockelteste, a dark, kind, and quiet woman named Ruzenka. Late that night, the gate-keeper entered our block. She was a fat woman, wearing a scarf and carrying a stick. She shouted, "Ru-he, ru-he! (Qui-et, qui-et)," and so we knew someone important was coming. An SS man came into our block and entered Ruzenka's cubicle. Then we were all ordered to sing. When the SS man left, we stopped singing. But we could hear Ruzenka crying long into the night. The next day, Mother chose another barrack for us, as far away from the gate as possible, near the train tracks. There were no gates on that side."

Five months later, their very distance from this gate would help to preserve their lives.

Rules

"Mother established rules for us right away. We were to stay away from the gate. That's where most of the selections took place. Next, the family would try to stay together. This was the most important rule of all. If one of us was chosen to go in a particular direction, we would all try to go in that direction, no matter what it was. Finally she told us never to look at a Nazi's eyes. I was chosen several times. For what? You just don't know. The Nazis selected for all kinds of things. Sometimes they selected the sick, sometimes people with blue eyes, sometimes people with long thin fingers, sometimes people with limps or deformities of any sort: people with broad backs, people who hemorrhaged, pregnant women. Fat people and people with glasses were selected out right away. Older women, too. There were very, very few mothers in C-lager. I looked down and never saw the Nazi's eyes, and he selected someone else. It was less trouble for him than making a fuss. There were lots and lots of people to choose from.

He Has No Father

Grandmother, too, remembers the gate at C-Lager.

"You know, Gail, maybe I made a big mistake. We were at the gate in C-lager. I saw the boys there for the last time. Tibi was little and Ernie big. I told Erno, 'You take care of Tibi. He's here without a father. You promise me?' 'I promise.' But I made a mistake. In Auschwitz, they let the strong go with the weak. I gave them something hot to drink what I had received, and I didn't see them again. Never."

Part II: After Father Left

Two Dreams

Mom and I sit at the kitchen table, she with coffee, I with tea. Dinner is finished, and as we discuss the events of the day, we slide inevitably, slowly, back toward the Holocaust.

"Grandmother had a dream last night," I tell her.

"What did she dream?"

"She dreamed of an infant face down in a puddle. She said she pulled it out and saved its life."

"That was no dream. That really happened to Tibi when he was very young. He fell into a puddle in our yard, not very deep but he couldn't get out. The dog saw him and ran, barking, to get Mother. She found Tibi, pulled him out, and gave him artificial respiration to start him breathing again. She saved his life. Later, Tibi saved the life of another little boy who was drowning in a river. Tibi was no bigger than the drowning boy, but he jumped into the water and pulled that child to the shore. The next day, the child came to him.

"You saved my life, and I'm going to give you a whistle. Whenever you blow it, I'll run to help you."

Tibi wore the whistle on a string around his neck. It was a metal whistle, shrill. You could hear it from far away. Once in a while, he tested it, and the little boy always came running."

Who knows what became of the whistle that summoned help without fail.

Tibi arrived on the train platform of Auschwitz-Birkenau in May of 1944, about two weeks after Passover, along with his mother, his brother, Erno, and his sisters, Lenka and Olga.

* * *

Mom was closest to her two brothers.

"Tibi was always small for his age, with light brown hair, but Erno looked large and broad-shouldered. He had dark brown hair, dimples, and blue eyes.. Once when Erno was climbing trees, Tibi wanted to climb too, but he couldn't reach and began to cry. Erno comforted him: "You are big, my dear Tibike, you are big. Only your feet are little." Tibi wanted so much to be big. When we arrived at the train station in Birkenau, they were twelve and fourteen years old. The Nazis separated the men from the women, women on the right, men on the left. My boyfriend from the ghetto was an auto-mechanic. He said, 'Don't worry. I'll stay with them. We'll tell the Nazis we're all auto-mechanics and I'll show them what to do.' He must have kept his word, because they survived until the day before liberation. They were shot on the death march."

"How do you know?"

"After the war, we started heading back home to Czechoslovakia to look for my brothers. There were signs and notes up everywhere, in all the train stations, on walls. 'Have you seen my father, my sister? I am looking for so and so from the town of such and such.' But no note about my brothers. Then we met a fellow who had been with them on the death march. He told us they had both been shot. After that we didn't bother to go home.

* * *

"I spoke to Grandmother," Mom tells me. "She had a dream last night."

"What did she dream?"

"She dreamed of a black boot crushing the face of an infant."

Mom and I sit at the table over our tea cups. We do not look up at each other. We cannot speak because we are fighting back tears that neither of us is supposed to notice or shed. That is one of the unspoken laws of storytelling: Do not cry. We leave the table. That night, we do not discuss the Holocaust at all.

Tibor Berkovic

There is a photograph of Tibi with his grandfather, his father's father, Martche Berkovic. The eyes of the old man are hidden beneath the brim of his black hat, his lower lip by a white beard, but something about his cheek and the tip of his nose suggests a smile. His large hand, relaxed and possessive, drapes around Tibi's elbow. Tibi, in his best and only suit, smiles his secret smile beneath a smaller black hat. Tibi was the youngest son, the family favorite who always got the extra piece of chocolate.

Everyone has a story about Tibi.

Tibi's Watch

"On the train to Auschwitz," my mother says, "we were all crowded in. They gave us nothing, not even a bucket to relieve ourselves. Tibi found a crack at the bottom of the box car. The box cars were not like the ones here. They were smaller, wooden. Tibi had a pen knife with him. He began to enlarge the crack.

"Don't worry, Mother," he said. "I'll make a space here so we can piss." And he did. He worked at that crack all day. It was the only relief we had.

When we had left home, we were allowed to take nothing with us, not even food. Mother said, "All right children, put on something warm and something cool." It was May, and the weather was changeable. Olga and I were dressed like twins, in our dresses made especially for Passover. We both wore two dresses, one right on top of another, one for warm weather, and one in case it got colder. Erno took his camera with him, and Tibi took his most precious possession, his watch. It was his bar mitzvah gift. He was twelve. Mother must have given it to him because Father was already gone to America by then. As soon as he got it, he took it all apart to see how it worked. He was still working on putting it back together when the Nazis came and we had to leave home. The Levente, the Hugarian boy scouts, appeared at our door early in the morning armed with guns to march us to the train station and take us to the ghetto. It was still dark. Tibi took his watch with him, with all the pieces wrapped up in a white handkerchief that he tied together in a knot.

Our family's dog, Sekfu (Carnation), followed us all the way to the station. Tibi and Erno loved the dog. They would try to hide him inside under the kitchen table while we were eating to

feed him scraps, but I always knew.

"The dog is here!" I would yell. I can't eat. Get the dog out!"

"He's not here, he's not here," Tibi would say.

"Oh, yes he is! I can smell him."

That dog followed us all the way to the train station at Patak, thirty minutes away by foot. The Hungarian Nazis put us on a regular passenger train. When the train left the station, the dog ran after us, running and crying, running and crying, as far as he could. We watched until he vanished in the distance."

Aunt Olga Tells the Tale of Tibi and the Midget

"Father left for America in 1939. Then he sent for Ilona and Margi, and they settled on South St. in Philadelphia. They were both college bound in Czechoslovakia, but in the States, they worked in sweat shops to try to earn enough money to bring the rest of us over. They learned to sew coats.

One day Mother said, "We will go to America, too." She arranged a trip to Budapest, where she had plans to get visas for us. She never told us about the visas, of course. We were children. She said she had goods to sell there, and she would take us to the English Park. This was a circus-like extravaganza filled with booths and booths everywhere you looked, and it had a children's theater. Mother took us. During the children's theater, Tibi was riveted at the sight of a troop of midgets. He watched with enormous concentration as one stood still in the center of the

stage while a man of ordinary height measured him with matches. The midget turned out to be thirty-four matches high. At the end of the performance, Tibi begged mother, "Please, please, let me take him home with me. Let me take him home so he won't have to be on display any more." But Mother wouldn't let him.

And you know, Mother actually did get tickets to America. One day, we went back to Budapest again, without luggage -- so nobody would know we were going for good -- and she had tickets in her pocket for all of us. She went to the American embassy for the visas, but they wouldn't give the visas without a guarantee. That was some sort of special permission to travel through the various countries you would have to pass through. You couldn't get a guarantee unless you had a lot of money, and Mother didn't have the money.

So she went to visit father's brother, Bela, who lived there in Budapest to ask him for the money. He said, "I don't have it, and even if I did, I wouldn't give it to you. They'll just take it from you, for nothing." So we had to go back home again to Verbovec. That was the trip to America."

Tibi and the Scrambled Egg

"After Father left home in 1939," my mother explains, "times were rough. We were placed under house arrest, not because we were Jewish, but because father was a Czech nationalist, and our home was in Hungary now. The border had shifted. It used to run right through our back yard, but now we were completely in Hungary. Because Father had been the mayor of the town, a price was placed on his head, wanted dead or alive. The gendarmes, a kind

of Hungarian police, would come every day looking for father. They barged into the house and ripped up the feather beds, looking for him. They took anything they wanted: his bicycle, the cow, the chickens, the bags of wheat. That was all our food, you know, and mother had four children there to feed. I began to wonder, 'What will we eat if the soldiers take all the food?'

Before the war, there was always plenty of food. Father planted fruit trees, and we had apples and grapes and cherries. Pears, too. We ate them right from the trees; they never touched a plate. If you had a cow, you were rich, and we had a cow. We had chickens and geese, too. A glass jar of herring and onions stood by the door in the kitchen. Mother kept a pot of soup on the stove to scoop from whenever you wished. In the backyard garden, we grew greenbeans, potatoes, onions, and radishes. Have you ever tasted a greenbean that you've just picked? There was never a lot of meat, but Mother knew how to make one chicken into enough meals to feed five for a week. One day it would be a soup made from the neck and feet, the next chicken fat fried with onions or the skin of the neck stuffed with bread crumbs, the next, the meat of the chicken itself.

After father left, we could no longer afford hired help. Mother knew how to graft roses so that four colors bloomed together on one stem, but she couldn't raise vegetables. And the Hungarian gendarmes kept coming to steal from us. On good days, a neighbor would leave a packet of food by the door. We never knew who, but gradually, there was less and less. Even our beloved pet lambs ended up in a stew. We cried and cried and refused to eat it.

One day Mother asked us to steal. Don't tell her I told you so, but it's true. We had four children and no chickens, and our neighbors had a lot of chickens, and no children. Mother said, "Lenka, boys, go outside. Play tag in the neighbors' yard and snatch up one of their chickens."

We did, and we had a good meal. But Mother never asked us to steal again after that.

We were always hungry. Once Mother beat Erno for taking more than his share of the bread. A single egg had to feed the five of us. In the good days, Tibi had always been very spoiled. He would have a whole egg to himself. Mother would give him a secret piece of candy. But once father left, the gendarmes would come around and take whatever we had to eat. One day we had a dinner of fried eggs and onions. Tibi loved scrambled eggs. (Mother pauses here. This story is a difficult one to speak aloud.) He looked at the eggs on his plate . . . and there were hardly any eggs at all. He said, 'I wish I could eat a whole plateful of scrambled eggs, as much as I want, all by myself.' Such a simple wish . . . but it never came true.

A Visit to the Gendarmes

"Of course, it wasn't all bad after Father left. We had adventures, my brothers and I. Of all my siblings, I was closest with my brothers. They were my playmates. We went everywhere together. We played ghost in the graveyard. Erno organized treasure hunting: looking for turtles, mushrooms, and snakes. Then there was the fun of funerals. We had never been to a real one, of course, but Erno held funerals for the animals. If someone's pet died, he buried it. He gathered children for the funeral procession, mad a hole and said a prayer. He knew how to say Kaddish. That's how the pet lamb was buried after the rat killed it.

Once, to get more food, we went fishing. A man showed us a place where an entire village had sunk into quicksand where we could get lots of fish. and he was right. We caught so many, just with our hands, that I had to take my skirt off, and we filled it with fish and dragged it

home. Mother spanked us once she found out where we had been. One day, we decided to go see the gendarmes' feathers. Their hats were topped with clusters of feathers, like an entire rooster's tail. To see them we had to cross the border between the Czech and Hungarian territory. This was dangerous, so we didn't just go. We had a plan. For a week Erno, Tibi, and I discussed our visit in secret. We decided to start out from the backyard, then go to the first cornfield and then crawl to the wheatfield. You have to be careful going through a wheatfield, because the wheat moves so much when you pass through it. Next we would go through a depressed area in the wheatfield so we'd be less visible. We would rest in the field with the haystacks, and we knew which haystacks we would run to if we needed to hide.

On the day we decided to set out, Mother was cooking. We told her that we were going, but we waited until she was busy preparing knaidliche and just wanted us out of the kitchen. She had no idea about what we planned to do, or she would have stopped us. We crossed the cornfield and then the wheatfield. We went right through a haystack because we thought that that would be more fun than going around it. But when we came out the other side, the first thing that we saw was a pair of black boots. I looked up, and there was a border guard!

"What are you doing here?"

"We've come to see the gendarmes' feathers!"

The guard took us to see the Hungarian gendarmes. There they were, with their gorgeous plumes. They sat us down at a table and fed us butter cookies and tea, then sent us home again. But the way back was more difficult. The Czech border guards saw us in the no man's land between Hungary and Czechoslovakia and shot over our heads to frighten us. We were terrified. When we got home, Mother spanked all three of us."

A Visit from the Gendarmes

"The gendarmes were there when we were arrested and taken from home," Aunt Olga tells me. "It was about two weeks after Passover, in April, 1944. I went outside early and discovered a boy scout on the front steps with a gun. Another one stood by the front gate. The boy scouts were nothing new. They were there everyday when we went to school, because of the house arrest. We came out of the house, and they would say, "Stop, or I'll shoot!" Your mother and I would say, "If you want to shoot, shoot," and leave the house. They never shot, of course, and we went to our school. But on this day, they wouldn't let me out of the house. I knew all of them, all teenagers, all loyal Hungarian civilians. I told Mother, and she said, 'Go, slip out the back way and go across the street. Find Ferenz Bacsi. Ask him if he knows what is going on.' Ference was not our uncle, but was called 'bacsi' out of respect. He was a member of the Hungarian underground.

It wasn't light yet. I saw very few people out on the street, and the ones I did see averted their eyes and pretended not to see me. I knocked on the door at Ference Bacsi's house, and his mother-in-law, whom we called Mama, let me in. She was a very sweet woman.

"Mama, do you know what's happening?" I asked her.

"Go home, Olga, go home. Tell your mother it's no good." She had tears in her eyes.

They gave us three minutes to pack, then we had to go. Outside, they gathered together the four Jewish families in Verbovec, maybe about twenty people, all old men and women and children. The young men had been taken long before for the Hungarian labor service. Only one family in Verbovec was Orthodox. A single gendarme stood before us making a speech. He

sounded just like the Hungarian press. The Jews could not be trusted, he said. They must be removed from their communities and made to work, for the good of Hungary. We would be taken to work where it was safe for us, away from the military zone, deeper inside Hungary, and when the war was over, we could return. Then they marched us all under armed guard to the train station in Patak, thirty minutes away.

We knew the people who rounded us up. I recognized every one of the teenagers. . . .You know, we were always decent to those jerks."

Two Goodbyes

"The streets were nearly empty when we left," my grandmother, Esther, told me. "Only one neighbor came to say goodbye, the wife of Zsiga Bacsi. She ran up to us, weeping, and stayed just long enough for quick hugs and kisses. I gave her some of the bedding that I was carrying.

"At the train station in Patak was another woman, Marishka. She was a widow with four children who had cooked for our family, before, when times were good. She had her arms crossed on her chest.

"It's about time," she said. "I cooked for her long enough."

"I aways wondered why she said that. She worked for us -- not for nothing; she was paid. Whatever we ate, she ate, from the same food. If Marishka cooked stuffed cabbages, her children had stuffed cabbages that night for dinner. If she milked the cow, she took milk. If she fried

blintzes for us, her children had blintzes, just as good as ours. Maybe better. Marishka chose them herself. Why would she say a thing like that?"

When did you First Feel Fear?

"When did I first feel fear?" Mother considers the question over coffee.

"I was never afraid as a child. I never knew there was anything to be afraid of. When I was little, I would go out into the back yard. Father raised bees, and the hives were lined up back there in a row. I used to stand still right at the entrance to a hive to watch the bees go about their business. I stood so close to the entrance that the bees had to fly over my head, like a halo, and around me to get into their opening. I was never stung. I don't think I even knew that bees could sting.

"I felt safe, too, when father was home, because I knew that he slept with a gun under his pillow. The gun always made me feel safe."

"How did you feel when your father vanished?"

"You know, I never knew he vanished. He was just gone away on another business trip, as far as I was concerned, and there was nothing unusual about that. The adults never told the children what was going on. So when he left, I thought nothing about it. And if I asked a question, would I get an answer? I assumed father was safe, so I really wasn't anxious. If a letter arrived, I never noticed. I didn't see my father again for seven years."

Adolf Berkovic

What I miss most about my grandfather is his whistling. He whistled dry, tuneless melodies while he threaded a needle or mended an umbrella. He carried home orphaned umbrellas that he found in the street and fixed each one carefully. I knew him as a tailor, a slender man surrounded by measuring tapes and pins. He had learned to be a tailor in his youth, as an apprentice in Debrecen, Hungary, where he had gone to high school and had won a medal of pure silver for being the best student. He invented the Stick-a-Magic, a measuring tape that a tailor could simply apply to the suit of a man being fitted, and it would hang there so you could bend down easily to determine the length. The backing on the Stick-a-Magic looked very much like the later invention, Velcro, and worked on the same principle. I thought of Grandfather as an indoors man, living a small, quiet life. He grew African violets in little pots by the window. His greatest pleasure was playing cards. But that was in America. Here, his life was simple, a pencil sketch. He had been larger in the Old Country, more like a splashy oil painting.

With five rooms, his home was the largest house in Verbovec, right at the center of town, where the two dirt roads crossed. He owned fields, orchards, vegetable plots, grape arbors, fattened geese. In Verbovec, where success was measured by whether or not a cow stood in your barn, Grandfather was mayor. He had a cow. His children could drink fresh milk daily. His neighbors drank schnapps in his tavern to the sounds of violins, cembala, and clinking billiard balls. He organized a fire brigade and sewed snappy uniforms for all the members, giving his own uniform, as leader, extra braids of gold. Needlewomen of Verbovec stitched garments that he sealed safely in tin casks and carted off to market in the next town. He hired Russian laborers to

work the huge threshing machines and built a new section of homes to house them. If someone was ill, Mayor Berkovic hopped on his bicycle and pedaled to the next village to fetch medicine. He would be paid with potatoes, onions, or carrots. He was not a strictly observant Jew. He wore no beard. Nonetheless, in his backyard stood the small building that served as the synagogue for the few Jewish families of Verbovec. When invasion threatened Czechoslovakia in 1938, he put himself in charge of civil defense and gathered a group of men to help cut trees to block the roads.

He was on a business trip to Prague when the Nazis invaded.

"Your grandfather saw windows opening and bodies falling when the Nazis invaded Prague," Aunt Olga explained. Jewish people were committing suicide. He came home in secret at night and kissed us goodbye. Everybody else was asleep, but I knew he was there. By morning, he was gone for good. He gave half of the family's money to Mother. The other half he took with him. He already had all the documents ready: his passport, visas, traveling permits, shipfare, and an immigration quota number from his brother in America who would vouch for him, Uncle Sam.

"How could he have those things ready in 1939?"

"He read newspapers, pounds and pounds of newspapers. He knew he might have to leave. Once he was gone, a price was placed on his head, wanted, dead or alive. But he was miles away by then. He made his way across Germany to the port in Hamburg. He had tickets for a boat called the Hansa. With him, he took only two things. Do you know what they were? His Bible and the silver medal he won at school for being the best pupil. Nothing else."

"How does a Jewish man travel across Nazi Germany to catch a boat?" I asked Grandmother one day.

"He didn't look Jewish. He was a tall man, blond with blue eyes, and he had a little moustache under his nose, like Hitler's. That was the style then. Part of the way he walked, part of the way he was able to ride. At night, he stayed in farm houses. He carried bread and herring wrapped in a newspaper. I knew he was going to America, but for a long time I didn't hear from him.

One day, a neighbor came to me. He said he had found Adolf's body in a river, in a ravine not far from my house. Adolf had come back, he said, and had been caught. He whispered, 'Don't tell anyone I told you.' I went out and hired a no-good-nick, a guy with a gun from my village, to be my bodyguard. He went with me to the ravine to try to find my husband's body."

Esther Zicherman Berkovic

Grandmother was in her eighties when a store clerk offended her as she tried to buy a dress. The clerk chose to wait on her slowly, Grandmother felt, because the young have contempt for the old. When the young clerk finally commenced ringing up the sale, Grandmother spoke to her.

"You know, I see you are a very nice-looking young woman, very pretty. But I want to tell you something. When I was your age, I was twice as beautiful as you are."

A photograph of Grandmother, taken in Budapest when she was sixteen, shows that she was, indeed, beautiful. Beneath the broad rim of her black hat, she stares directly at the camera,

entirely serious. Her face is a slightly tilted oval. The photo was taken when she had come to Budapest to see a specialist, and she needed the specialist because of the horse. She loved riding horses. She would take gifts of tobacco to a man who ran a grocery store in exchange for a chance to ride a horse. She rode well, but the Jewish boys in town felt that it was improper for a Jewish girl to ride at all. They sought her out and threw rocks at the horse until they hit it. The horse bolted and threw her, imbedding gravel in her hands and injuring an eye. She had come to Budapest to have the eye taken care of.

"Did you ever ride a horse again after that, Grandmother?"

"Oh, yes, I rode. But I rode in different places. And when I saw the boys coming again with their rocks, I rode away quickly, before they could catch me. They never got me again. When I was young, Gail, I had a wild streak. I would ski down mountains and rode horses without a saddle. I was the oldest daughter, and none of my sisters could marry before I did, but I didn't want to marry. They brought yeshiva buchers to see me, but they were all so small, with pais. Their shoes were small, like the shoes of children. I hid from them in the branches of a tree and wouldn't come down until they left. I didn't want these men. I wanted a good dancer, a tall man. I wanted to be serenaded. I wanted pears from the top branches.

"Our family's cook, Mima, said to me one day, 'Esther, why are you so choosy?' 'If your nephew would come, I would marry him.' I was from a rich family, and I married our cook's nephew. Adolf came and played his violin to serenade me. We rode in a horse-drawn carriage to our wedding, and the feast was held at my Grandmother Shifra's house, on top of the highest mountain. Your grandfather gave me a necklace, all of gold coins. He was a very good dancer.

"You can imagine how I felt when the neighbor came to tell me he had found Adolf's body in a river."

The Ravine

"I went with the bodyguard to the ravine, to see if I could find my husband's body. The ravine was not far from home, but a deserted area, filled with trees and rocks. I got to the river and went in, up to my waist, and tried to look down through the water. All around me I could see silver fish swimming. But no Adolf. In the forest by the river bank, I could see some of my neighbors, hiding and watching from behind the trees."

The Hungarians Hunt for Adolf

"It was only after the war," my mother tells me, "that we found out how my grandfather, my father's father had died. I was always told that he had sat down on a chair where there wasn't a chair and broken a hip. But it wasn't so. After the war, one of Father's brothers told us what happened. After Father left, the Hungarians had come looking for him at his father's house. They thought he might be hiding there. They demanded to know where he was. Grandfather either wouldn't tell them, or really didn't know. They kicked him to death. We never told my father how his father died."

The Hansa

"Mother was anxious for news about Father," Aunt Olga explained, "so she sent me to Velki Sevlus, a bigger town not far from home, just a short train-ride away. Our school was there. The town's name meant Big Grapes. In that town lived a man who had also gone to Prague with father and tried to escape. He wasn't successful, though, and had to return home. I found this man and asked him if he knew anything about Father. He sent back only three words: 'He got out.' So we knew that he had probably made it to his boat, the Hansa.

This was the period when we were under house arrest and the gendarmes kept coming to look for Father and take things from us. Once, I had to hold up a lantern for them while they went into a storage room to search for Father. While I stood holding the lantern at the top of the stairs, I listened. One man, who had once worked for my father, called out, 'You don't know Mr. Berkovic. He'll hide anywhere,' and he plunged his bayonette into a half-empty barrel of sauerkraut. But Father wasn't hiding in a barrel of sauerkraut. We knew he was safe, but we didn't know exactly where.

Then one day, the gendarmes came with a newspaper article that they had cut out. They were very, very happy -- elated -- and they showed the article to Mother while they grinned their big grins. The article showed a picture of the ship, my father's ship, the Hansa, sinking into the water. It had been blown up as it left the harbor on its way to America.

Two Letters

"After father left for America in 1939," Aunt Olga tells me, "things got tough. Did you know that Aunt Margi was arrested? Yes, she was arrested for singing a Russian folksong in the front yard. I was ready to attend college. I had done all my course work, but then Jews weren't permitted to attend the universities any more, so Mother sent me to Salank. A family there had angora rabbits, and they were supposed to teach me how to spin wool thread from the rabbit fur. This way, Mother figured, I could help to earn a little more money. I spent a few days in Salank, learned to spin, and came home again. But there were no angora rabbits in Verbovec, and my career ended.

"One day, two letters arrived from America, both already opened. They both said the same thing: Father was alive. Father didn't write the letters himself because he was afraid that direct contact with him might endanger the family. One letter came from a neighbor's daughter who had settled in Long Island, the other was from a cousin in New Jersey. As soon as he could, Father saved money to bring Ilona and Margi over. Mother went with them to the train station in Budapest. From there they would travel to Trieste, Italy, and then to New York. In Budapest, the officials demanded assurance that both daughters would return, and Mother swore that they would be attending the 1939 New York World's Fair and gave them a large sum of money, which she would lose if the girls didn't come back again. But she had no intentions of having them return. Ever."

Grandfather talks about the Hansa

Grandfather was a born story-teller. He could spin the smallest incidents into elaborate jokes that would last twenty minutes or more in the telling. He would often recount the day when he was five or six and had sewn a steak in the family's new sewing machine, a process which rendered the meat no longer kosher. The family dinner was ruined. He spoke about his apprenticeship as a tailor; the day he tried to cook a goose quickly by roasting it without plucking it first; his method for avoiding shooting fellow Jews in World War I by shouting 'Shema Yisrael' (If someone shouted the same words back, you shot in another direction); and the Golem in Prague. But he never spoke about the Holocaust. When he died in Philadelphia a month shy of eighty-eight years, Grandmother looked at me and said, "No more story-teller."

Twice, however, he told me the story of the trip to America. I record the substance of the tale here from memory, but I cannot hope to duplicate Grandfather's grand, meandering style.

"To come to America, I had to catch a boat from a port in Germany. I had everything I needed, all the tickets, all the papers to immigrate. But when I got to the port, something was missing, some kind of a stamp. All day I had to stand in a very long line to get the pass, and I waited so long that I missed the boat! My ship left without me. But do you know what happened? That very boat that I missed blew up as it left the harbor. In the meantime, I got my stamp and boarded the next boat for America. That one traveled safely."

Passport

I look at a photocopy of my Grandfather's passport. My Grandfather in 1939 had a strong, pleasant face with soft eyes and thick hair combed straight back. His passport, I find, was issued in Sevlus (short for Velki Sevlus), Czechoslovakia, on January 30, 1939. It must have taken a month or two to get the passport, and longer than that to get the visa and immigration number. At that time, you could not immigrate to the United States without a sponsor, someone who vouched to support you until you got on your own feet. He had to arrange a sponsor somehow. None of this could be done quickly, and yet the fall of Czechoslovakia and his flight from his home had certainly taken place in rapid fire.

"Mom, I'm confused." I announced during one phone call. "Why were the Hungarians targeting Grandpop personally? He was the mayor of an itsy-bitsy backwater town. Why would anyone care about him at all, let alone put a price on his head and hunt for him, devotedly, up hill and down?"

"It had to do with politics. Your grandfather was a Czech nationalist. Anti-Semitism was on the rise at that time -- remember that medical student? -- and the Hungarians especially wanted to kill all the Jews who wanted the area to remain as Czechoslovakia instead of Hungary. At that time, too, the Czech government issued a land redistribution act. There were a lot of Hungarian absentee landlords in Czechoslovakia. They lost their land during that redistribution. Dad was active in that. He brought in Russian laborers and established a settlement for them."

"But Grandpop already had his passport in hand by January of 1939. Czechoslovakia wasn't invaded by the Nazis and the Hungarians until March 1939, three months later. Why did he have his passport ready so early? He couldn't have known what was going to happen."

"He was planning to go to the United States even before all the trouble began. He had a brother, Sam, who had emigrated and married Cheva. But Sam was lonely for his family. He wanted a brother to come to America, too. Sam was poor in those days, but he was the sponsor for your grandfather and sent the papers, and Dad agreed to go."

"But why would he agree to go? He had a good life in Czechoslovakia. He was relatively well-to-do."

"Sam was a reader. He read the New york Times and the Yiddish newspapers. He must have known what was happening to the Jews in Germany, and he wanted to reach out a helping hand. He was reaching out beyond what he could afford, to help one brother. Dad was a reader, too. He traveled to Budapest and Uzhgorod to buy liquor for his tavern, and while he was there he bought newspapers. He read them from the first word to the last. By 1933, Jews were already emigrating from Germany. Their livelihoods were being taken away. Czechoslovakia and Germany were neighbors.

Ilona

"You know, Gail, about one thing I was always very sorry."

"What was that, Grandmother?"

"I am very sorry I slapped Ilona. This was after your Grandfather left for America. Ilona was sixteen years old. She attended then a business school. Jews still could attend schools at that time. With her was a young Hungarian soldier in a military uniform, an admirer, who walked her home from school. Every day the Gendarmes came to take from us, and take, and now here was another Hungarian with Ilona. I slapped Ilona across the face, in front of the young man. He asked me, 'Why did you do that?' 'To show that here you are not wanted,' I told him. For this, I have always been sorry."

In 1939, Ilona traveled to America by boat with her sister, Margit. She was sixteen then, and Margi fifteen. They would not see their mother again for seven years.

When were you first aware of anti-Semitism?

"As a child, I wasn't aware of any special anti-Semitic feeling," mother explains. "I didn't know much about Judaism. That was for the boys. The girls were taught nothing. I knew the Shema, and I remember going to the synagogue once for Simchas Torah. My brothers and I were given paper banners at dusk in the little synagogue behind our house. On top of each flag, a candle was attached and lit. The three of us raced around trying to burn down each other's banners. As we ran, the candles looked like streams of light in the dark. It was very beautiful.

"The very first time I experienced anti-Semitism was on a day that I was walking home from school. Some of the other children shouted at me, 'Jew, go back to the stinking Jordan!' I had to go home to ask my parents what the stinking Jordan was. I had never heard of it.

"Did I tell you about my court case? I used to tutor students to make extra money to help the family, and after Father had gone, this became more important than ever. I wasn't paid until the students passed their courses. All the students I tutored passed, and all the fathers paid me, except for one. He was a peasant, and I don't know if he was anti-Semitic, or just thought that I would be easy to cheat since my father was gone. But I took him to the Hungarian court, and I won! The judge ordered him to pay double what he owed me. So, there was still justice for Jews in Hungarian courts."

"I later found out that this judge was the brother of Marie Neni (Aunt Marie), a teacher of mine. Marie Neni was a Hungarian woman, a teacher who had never been permitted to teach in Czechoslovakia because she refused to take the Czech oath of loyalty. Now, under the Hungarians, she was a hero and at last had a teaching post, a salary, and enough money to fix her teeth. She used to lend me books to read from her personal library, all the classics.

"Another teacher I had was not so nice: my math teacher. He was a German, and he loved to tell anti-Semitic jokes in class. His favorite joke was about a Jew and some money:

> *A Jew found a coin in the middle of the street on the Sabbath. Right there, he stepped on the coin and refused to move. Bikes passed. Wagons passed. Finally, a peasant on a cart demanded that he get out of the way. Still the Jew would not budge but stood on the coin. Enraged, the peasant jumped down from his cart and beat the Jew until he saw stars. "Oh thank you, thank you," cried the Jew. "Thanks for the beating. Now I've seen the first evening stars." And he bent over, picked up the coin, and left.*

At that time I didn't know that Jews were not allowed to handle money on the Sabbath, or that the first evening stars signaled the end of Sabbath, but I felt ashamed."

"Were there many Jews in your class besides you?" I asked.

"The class was about half Jewish."

"How did the others react?"

"We were all, all silent, all ashamed. No one laughed except the teacher himself.

* * *

"It got harder and harder to go to school. First they closed the universities to Jews. Olga was ready to go to the university, but she had to stay home. Then the Hungarians decided to hold classes on Saturdays, to make it harder for the Jewish students to attend. We wouldn't travel on the Sabbath, so we had to stay someplace overnight. My grandfather lived in the town with the school, so I stayed with him. On spring days, our problems increased, because we had to wait a long time for the sun to go down so we could take our train home. Even if a Jewish child decided to attend class on Saturday -- and the devout would not -- Jewish law states that no writing can take place on the Sabbath. The Hungarians made sure to give exams on Saturdays. They checked attendance. Too many absences, and they kicked you out of school. You had to choose between observing Sabbath and attending school. Then they set quotas, to further reduce the number of Jews in classrooms. Erno and Tibi, still in the lower grades, were permitted to go to their school as usual. My school was closed to Jews. Quickly, the Jewish community set up a makeshift Hebrew school in the same building where my Uncle Sandor lived, in Szollos. (Szollos is the Hungarian name for Sevlus.) I went.

It wasn't much of a school. Only about a dozen Jewish children attended. The community had hired a Mr. Richter to teach us Hebrew and Latin. He was a very poor man. His jacket was fastened with a clothes pin to hide the fact that he had no shirt to cover his bare chest. Mr. Richter was far too depressed and distracted to teach. He said he would teach us Hebrew, but he never got around to it. He would begin to dictate lessons on Jewish history, but his sentences trailed off and he stared into space. He had many children at home. All of them must have been hungry. Poor Mr. Richter began class every day with a single Latin verb, always the same one: laudo, laudas, laudat . . ." But after this recitation, he would run out to the radio and spend the rest of the time listening. This school lasted for about two weeks. Then the Nazis took us away to the ghetto.

Returning from the University

"What was the name of that boy?" I ask. "The Hungarians wouldn't give his body back to his father." Mom is telling me about anti-Semitism, but she hasn't yet told the story of the university student, a story that I feel compelled to hear, even though it is repellent. I want to hear, remember, and write.

"That was Moric. But I don't remember his last name. You'll have to ask Olga. She's good with names. When the Nazis invaded Prague in 1939, he came home from the university and just disappeared. Finally, the Hungarians told his father where his body was. There was no reason why they should have killed him. But they didn't just kill him. They tortured him . . . and skinned him alive."

"How did you find out about the murder?"

"I was very young. Mother would never have told me. I couldn't understand why this would happen, why anyone would hurt anyone else. I was very frightened when I heard about his death, but it seemed so far away. I tried not to think about it."

I phone my Aunt Olga.

"Hello, Olga."

"Hello, dear."

"Olga, I'm writing about the Holocaust now and I have a question for you."

"Go ahead, dear. Ask me any question and I'll do my best to answer it for you, if I can."

"Olga, do you remember the name of the boy who was skinned alive?"

"His last name was Liebowitz. Maybe your mother remembers the first."

"She says 'Moric.'"

"That's right. Moric Liebowitz. He was a Jewish student at the University of Prague. He was studying medicine there. He fled from the capital when the Nazis invaded in 1939 and made his way home to Salank, not far from where we lived. That was where I went later on to learn how to spin thread. His Hungarian neighbors killed him."

"But how did you find out about this murder? You were young at that time, about eleven."

"The kosher butcher came from Salank to Verbovec on Thursdays so there would be meat for the Sabbath. I stood in the doorway and listened. I overheard talk among the family, too. The butcher said that the peasants had killed him. Afterwards, they stood together in the tavern,

boasting and bragging. For days, the boy's family kept begging for the body, to bury it. Finally, it was returned, somehow. The nails were torn off his fingers, one by one. Traditional Hungarian torture. The body had been skinned. The Non-Jews were elated. They celebrated."

The Minister's Grandson

"Grandmother, how was it for the Jews in Verbovec before the war?"

"For a Jew in Verbovec, before the war was life very good, very fine. The people all got along together. When the church had a new bell made, people paid for it, and whoever paid the most had the honor of ringing the bell first. Your grandfather paid the most and rang that bell. He was good friends there with the minister.

"I spoke once to the minister's grandson. He was four years old, a blond child. 'Sanyi,' I said, 'What would you like to be when you grow up?' 'I would like to be a soldier and kill all the stinking Jews.' Sanyi was there with his mother. Edda her name was. She said, 'Sanyi, Aunt Estike is Jewish. You wouldn't want to hurt Aunt Estike, would you?' 'Oh, no, not Aunt Estike. Only all the other stinking Jews.'

Grandmother laughed quietly and shook her head.

* * *

If you were a Jew in Eastern Europe before World War II, Hungary was the best place to be. Although the government passed anti-Semitic legislation, they resisted Nazi demands to hand over their Jews. As a result, Hungarian Jews were the very last intact Jewish community in Europe, the last to be uprooted and sent to the camps. In 1939, Czech Jews of Bohemia and Moravia (the western part of the country) were deported to Poland. Polish Jews were sent to death camps beginning in 1941, as soon as the camps were set up. Russian Jews were shot by the advancing Einsatzgruppen in 1941. Jews were deported to Auschwitz from Slovakia (the central portion of Czechoslovakia) in 1942. French and non-French Jews were taken from Paris to Auschwitz in 1942. Jews were driven from Greece in 1943. But Hungarian Jews remained in their homes until 1944. In March of 1944, the Hungarian Regent Nicholas Horthy, who had resisted turning over Hungary's Jews, was summoned for a conference with Hitler and held prisoner for a day while the Germans took over the Hungarian government. Adolf Eichman rushed to Budapest to plan the deportations. Methodically, he divided Hungary into six zones. By April 16, all Jews were ordered into ghettos. Then, on May 15, three weeks before D-day, deportations to Auschwitz from Zone One, the Carpathians, began. My family lived in Zone One.

Part III: The Ghetto

Learning Fear

"Mom, when the gendarmes came knocking on your door that morning, how did you feel?"

"I don't think I heard the knock. I was asleep. Then Mother came to wake me up, and I went back to sleep."

"Were you afraid when you had to leave home?"

"No, I was with my family. When we were taken to the ghetto, it was a hot spring day, a little after Passover. The Hungarians took us, and a few Nazis with them. Mostly Hungarians. We left home with absolutely nothing, not even a little food. We arrived in Nagyszollos, a much larger city than my hometown, Verboc In Nagyszollos, the streets were full of people, other Jews, like us, who had been brought there by train. The Hungarians marched us from the train station to the synagogue. This synagogue was only about a block from my grandfather Berkovic's house, but I had never been inside it. Now it was part of the ghetto. In the sanctuary, I saw abuse. I saw gendarmes pulling the beards of the old men. I saw fear. I saw women being searched for gold. Even their wombs were searched. Boys were there, young Jewish boys who had a cross shaved into their hair. They looked frightened and were made to work collecting jewelry. I waited and waited in line. When my turn came, the young man came up to me to take my earrings. In that part of the world, little girls had earrings placed in their ears just after they are born. Mine were gold with a little blue stone in it, to match my eyes. I never thought about them; I was hardly aware of them. I had never taken them off. I tried to remove

them, but they were stuck. The Nazis started hollering, but the earrings wouldn't budge. Finally, I heard the Nazi in charge yell to the Jewish boy, "If the earrings don't come off, just rip them out." The young boy was frightened, but as he reached toward me, the earrings somehow snapped open. I never wore earrings again."

"We spent that night in the synagogue. People were crammed into every part of the synagogue. It was so crowded that we had to sleep sitting up; there was no room to lie down, even in the balcony. In the middle of the night, a young man came to talk to Mother. He was a gendarme, about twenty years old. I recognized him from the train to school, and I think he liked me. He told Mother that he was willing to hide me and Olga during the war. Mother came to us and told us about the young man's proposal.

"Girls, I told this man 'no,' but it's your decision."

We both said 'no.' We preferred to be with our mother and brothers. Besides, we were afraid that this man was a womanizer. But we didn't know, we just didn't know, what was coming."

"The next day, they took us from the synagogue into the rest of the ghetto. It was still open. Technically, it was forbidden to leave, but people could still come and go. Mother sent me once to get some medicine for my brother. The drugstore, run by a Jewish man, was outside the ghetto. I had no trouble getting there. Later, my brothers were allowed outside the ghetto for work. They would come back carrying beans for us to cook. The ghetto was just a few blocks, very crowded. In every room, families were crammed together. We lived in a kitchen together with five other families. The Nazis gave us no food in the ghetto, but whoever had anything shared. I had lots of boyfriends in the ghetto, so food was never a problem, and I saved food for

my siblings and mother. Your grandmother had a job volunteering in the hospital, and she could get her meals there."

The ghetto in Nagyszollos was limited to four city blocks, including the synagogue. In this area were concentrated 12,000 to 14,000 Jews from Nagyszollos itself and the surrounding county. Round-up in Zone I began on April 16, 1944, the first day of Passover, but the legislation legalizing ghettoization in Hungary was not passed until April 28. The Gendarmes and the local Hungarian police conducted the operation, assisted by teams in charge of collecting valuables. (Source: Brahm chapter 17)

Sharing

When Grandmother talks about the ghetto, she talks mainly about food.

"In the ghetto, it was crowded. We were lying and sitting where there was no place to sit. I volunteered for taking care of the old and sick people. They kept them there in the synagogue. I thought, 'If I work, I will be able to feed my kids.' I took care of the sick people, and I brought home bread, whatever I could. The Nazis brought in a little bread and mostly bacon. They gave us what we don't want to eat.

"One day, the minister passed the ghetto, your grandfather's friend. I asked him, please, bring some food. He promised, but he never came back. But maybe he was not the villain.

Maybe he was not permitted to come. It's possible. Once, a nun came to bring milk to the children of the ghetto. She gave it to Lenka, but the guards saw her giving food and beat the nun."

"Everybody shared there. . . . There, there was nothing to share."

Aunt Bertha and the Jewish Curse

"Did anyone help you while you were in the ghetto?"

"A woman was kind to us once," Mom explains, "and brought us some food, but you couldn't just bring food to the ghetto. That was not permitted. But Aunt Bertha Niloshi was very clever, and she figured out a way to bring us food. She wasn't really our aunt, but we called her "Aunt" out of respect.

"Aunt Bertha was a flamboyant woman with a loud voice. One day, she came up to the gate hollering at the top of her lungs: "Berkovic! Berkovic! I'm going to be cursed by the Jew! I won't be able to die in peace! I have to give back what I owe her. Let me pay back what I owe her. I'm going to be cursed by the Jew!" Sure enough, the guards let her throw some loaves of baked bread over the fence to us.

"She was a bright woman, not at all superstitious, and she didn't believe in cursing. She owed us nothing, nothing at all. She was simply very kind."

Lenka's Utopia

My mother was protected from the strain of the ghetto. She felt safe simply being with her family, and best of all, she felt a new freedom from her mother, now tied up at her volunteer job tending the sick.

"I loved the ghetto. I was fifteen, very giggly, and for the first time, there were lots and lots of Jewish boys for me to date. At home, if I went on a date, Olga and Mother went with me. Now Mother was at work. There was nothing to do all day but walk and talk. It was crowded indoors, and Jews were not permitted on the street, so we walked through the gardens behind the houses. I met very nice boys there. One, an engineer, I would have married if he had survived. Pipa was his name. At taht time, you just held hands, you didn't kiss. That kind of relationship. He really liked me very much. Later in Auschwitz, he would help my brothers. In a world like that, it was unusual to take care of your own brothers, yet he took care of mine. Olga had a boyfriend, too. There were two twins, named Older and Younger. One was talkative, one quiet; one lively, one droopy. One of them liked Olga, the other didn't, but we could never tell which."

Olga in the Ghetto

"No, I didn't have a good time. Not like your mother. Your mother was very beautiful, with hair the color of corn silk. All the boys were attracted to her. I wasn't their favorite. And I was a year older than Lenka. Maybe I noticed more. I felt more responsible. We were taken to the ghetto in the midst of sitting shiva for my mother's brother. He had been in a forced labor

camp in Hungary and died there of TB. On the day that we left for the ghetto, I was supposed to have gone to Sard to help my grandmother with the shiva. Once we were in the ghetto, I was worried. I knew that Mother was being beaten. She was beaten when we were first taken to the ghetto, in the synagogue. Maybe she was beaten to find out where Father was. They were still looking for him. Or maybe Jewish people were beaten just to intimidate. Maybe the Hungarians thought that if people were beaten, they would cough up whatever valuables they had not already given. These were our lovely Hungarians who did the beating, not the Germans.

"How did you know that Grandmother was beaten?"

"I overheard her talking to other people . . . . Conditions in the ghetto were poor. We were taken to a home. In the kitchen, one corner already had people settled; in one corner we put our belongings -- one spot for the five of us. No facilities for showers or cooking. Imagine your house. In the living room there would have been five families and in the foyer, a family, and in the dining room and upstairs, more families. We spent most of our time outdoors, milling around. People were just adjusting to the situation wondering, 'What are the Nazis doing? Why are we here? What's next?'"

Walking to the Train

"When did you first feel fear?" I ask my mother.

"I first felt fear on the day we left the ghetto. We had been there for only a few weeks. Then one day, there was shouting. Gendarmes and Nazis hollered, 'Line up, line up!' Maybe

there were some Jews involved, too. There had been work groups in the ghetto assigned to various tasks, like cleaning out the Jewish houses that had been left. Perhaps the Jews in charge of those work groups now also helped to get us ready to go. They lined us up in rows of five. People hollered, screamed, cried. It's not easy to move a group of people with children and bundles quickly, and it didn't work very well. But it happened very suddenly, and we weren't able to take anything with us, not a cup, not a piece of bread, not a sweater; there was nothing to take. The Nazis marched us out to the train. They behaved like gentlemen. They didn't want to create a scene. As we walked, the community sort of gathered just to watch us, silently. No one gave us anything; no one has taken away anything. We just marched to the train, unprepared, with nothing. By now, I had only one dress on. I don't remember what happened to the other. I was not yet afraid. My mother, my brothers, and my sister were with me, and I was content. The Nazis said that we would be taken to work someplace in Hungary, and I was not afraid of work. But as I walked, I felt sad, crushed inside, no longer human.

I first felt fear when I saw a pair of glasses squashed on the ground. I recognized those glasses; I knew every corner of them. They belonged to an old man from my hometown, Moric Bacsi (Uncle Morris), a very respected, very well-beloved man. I knew that Uncle Morris needed his glasses to see. Why had they been crushed here? I thought, 'If anyone would do this to such a kind old man, what would they do to me?' The broken glasses frightened me very much, but I pushed the thought out of my mind. A little later, on the train, there were other signs that something was happening and that we might be in danger.

"When we walked to the train from the ghetto," my grandmother tells me during a phone call I've made to ask for her recollections, "we marched four in a row. Some educated people, talmud people, said, 'Let's pray, let's sing marching, like human beings.' They sang, 'Eli, Eli.' This is a prayer I never heard before. In the States I heard it, a synagogue prayer."

"Were you afraid in the ghetto, Grandmother?"

"Afraid? Sure. Everybody was afraid, but no one knew for what. We did not know."

I can't resist. I call Mom and tell her about Grandmother's recollection of "Eli, Eli." I know she will explode, just as she did about the water.

"Absolutely no. Absolutely no. No one sang when we went. There was nothing but silence. People walked softly with tears going down their faces. They said, 'Where's Moshele? Where's Jankele?' No singing on the train, either, and no prayer. I do remember one thing, though. When we got off the cattle cars in Auschwitz, Mother said to me and Olga, 'Keep your heads up. Walk straight, be proud.' Olga and I each held Mother by an arm, one on each side. We did not look to the right or the left. We didn't give the Nazis any chance to separate us. We kept our heads up."

The Train

I know the story of the ride in the boxcar very well. Mother has told it to me again and again over the years. Whenever we discuss fear, these tales come tumbling out.

"On the train, we were very crowded in. They gave us nothing, not even water, not even a bucket to urinate. The boxcar was wooden, smaller than the American boxcars. Tibi worked and worked at enlarging a crack with his pen knife, so we could have more air. The trip lasted maybe twenty-four hours, and the train only stopped once. When it stopped, a Nazi leaned into the car to demand valuables. Erno still had his camera with him, and the Nazi grabbed it, but Erno wouldn't let go. He hung on to that camera, but the Nazi finally wrestled it away from him. Erno was a fourteen-year-old boy. The Nazi said to him, 'Where you are going, you won't need this.' That frightened me. Why wouldn't my brother need his camera? After liberation, before I had learned that my brothers had been killed, I decided to replace Erno's camera. One day, we came upon a room with an enormous heap of cameras piled up, all kinds, and I went through it until I found one that looked just like the one that Erno had lost. I took it for him. When I discovered that he had been killed, I gave the camera away."

"To whom?"

"To a little Jewish boy we met in Paris. He was staying in the same building that we were in on Rue de Rosier. He was a survivor, about seven years old. He didn't even know his own name."

"While the door on the boxcar was open, I saw a sign, 'Krakow.' People leaned out the door, trying to get information from passersby. 'Where are they taking us? Where are they taking us?' One man stopped, a young Polish man. He must have been about thirty. The man gave a hideous grin, raised up his hand, and sawed back and forth across his throat, like this. (Hand held straight, elbow high, Mom makes a sawing gesture across her throat.) I thought he was a madman."

Krakow was the last stop before Auschwitz.

"Before we even got to Auschwitz, I knew that the Nazis had lied to us," Aunt Olga told me. "They had said that we were going to be taken to work, somewhere inside of Hungary, to the east, but as the train moved, I saw we were going west. We came to the town of Kosice. I saw the sign from the train. Kosice is in Slovakia, not Hungary, so I knew right then that the Germans had lied. We were on the train for about three days. By the time we arrived there, we were exhausted, tired, worn out."

Part IV: Birkenau

Twenty Minutes

I've spent a lot of time thinking about the man in striped pajamas, because if it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't be here today.

The man in striped pajamas had an enormous problem. He must have nurtured hope even as he stood before strings of cattle cars, newly arrived at Birkenau in May of 1944. A Jewish slave himself, he knew what fate awaited the Hungarian Jews who would emerge from the trains shortly. He knew about the four gas chambers and four crematoria that had been newly renovated to consume them. And he knew that if he warned anyone, anyone at all, and was caught, that some death -- a beating, a shooting, a tearing -- would befall him. He was sharp enough or practiced enough to understand that even if he did warn someone about the meaning of the fire and the smoke, they wouldn't believe him. Or perhaps he simply had no time to explain anything, and this turned out to be the best tactic of all. How could anyone believe him? Between the time that they jumped down from the box cars and the time that they were selected for life or death, only about twenty minutes would pass. Not enough time to grasp that the words "mother," "flame," "child," and "ash" were all synonyms here.

"It was a beautiful day, not hot, not cold. I jumped down from the box car and looked around." Mother was about to tell me again about arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau. I settled down on the couch to hear again the story that, as a child, I had requested more than any other.

"Men came to help us, because it was a big step down from the train, and we thought they were polite. They were good-looking, sturdy, tall, healthy boys. 'Don't take anything with you. Your packages will follow you.' Words in Yiddish. [Mom now leans forwared and whispers in a fierce, clipped style.] 'Pull yourself together! Make your self look nice! Brush your hair!" -- but in a chaos of screaming children. 'Straighten up. why are you so crooked? Don't look so miserable! Don't cry!' All kinds of words were thrown at us. Yiddish words. The men turned their backs to the Nazis and their heads were twisting back and forth. They didn't want the Nazis to see them speaking to us. Mother had on a pretty kerchief, not pulled down on her forehead like an old woman. She had straight posture from Sard, where they carried water on their heads in jugs. 'Straighten yourselves,' she said to us. 'Put your heads up, be proud of yourselves.' So we walked like two peacocks, one on each side of Mother. All around us, bedlam: children screaming, parents looking for children, dogs barking, sticks flying. It was a chaos, but an organized chaos.

"I thought, 'Well, so, I've arrived safely at my work camp.'"

"Why did you think, 'work camp'?"

"It's what the Germans said -- that we would be taken to a camp for work until the war ended, then we could go home again. Nobody ever heard of Auschwitz. I looked around. The shock of seeing light again affected your eyes, and you couldn't see clearly immediately. Through the gap between the box cars I could see women behind barbed wire -- weird, bald, shrieking. They were screaming, 'You can't take it with you. Throw it to us, give it to us.' But we didn't

know what they meant, and I thought, 'An insane asylum must be here.' Then by the gate, an orchestra, all women, playing beautiful music to welcome us."

"What did they play?"

"I don't know. Waltzes maybe. But the music was wonderful. Can you imagine how it is if you come from a town where you never had a radio, never even had electricity, and if you wanted music you made it yourself or hired a Gypsy to play, and now all of a sudden, an orchestra to greet us! On the other side of the tracks we could see some healthy-looking young men playing ball in a field. Nearby us was a cart with a red cross on the side. It all seemed very welcoming, so I thought all was well. You know about the red-cross cart? It has only one destination, straight to the gas chamber. The Nazis figured that if you're too tired to walk, you're too tired to work, and they didn't want you. We didn't know that then, though. But we weren't all that tired. None of us wanted to ride in the red-cross cart. Then, almost immediately, they separated the men from the women. Guards shouted, "Line up, line up," and we had to get into rows of five. Mother, Olga and I were together on one row, with two strangers.

"A weird man came up to us. He wore what looked like striped pajamas and a cap and he started right away to whisper."

'How old are you?'

"I was fifteen. It was the giggliest time of my life. Everything struck me as hilarious. Here was a young man, and I thought he was flirting with me. Except for his eyes. Something strange was in them. Fear was in them, but I had never seen fear before. I didn't know how fear looked. I didn't recognize it. And he said again, 'How old are you.' His eyes were darting side to side, side to side. But I just laughed and wouldn't tell him my age.

"A little later he came back again and again asked my age. '*How old are you?*' I said fifteen. That was my age at the time. He said, 'No, say you're sixteen. If they ask you, say you're sixteen.' Olga, who really was sixteen, he made one year older, and Mother who was forty-five became forty. We thought he was crazy.

"Then he came back again:

'Are you twins?'

"Mother had dressed Olga and me as twins. We arrived in Birkenau wearing the same dress -- a new one, with pinkish-orange flowers, made for Passover -- and we both had long blond hair. Again I wanted to joke and say, 'Sure, we're twins,' but I saw the fear in his eyes again and he said, '*Say you're not twins.*'"

"On the station platform we met one of my father's cousins. We hadn't seen her in years, and now here she was with five little children, from toddlers on up. All they could do was hang onto her skirt. Olga and I wanted to help her, and we each took a child by the hand. The man in striped pajamas came back again, very upset. And then he whispered, 'Are these children yours? *Give* the children back to the mother.' We thought, 'How rude! Was he an animal? A woman with that many children needs help. We held onto them. But he came back again: 'I told you to give the children back to the mother.' We still held their hands. He ran away again, disappeared, came back. And this time he spoke to our cousin. 'Do you want those girls (pointing at me and Olga) to be killed? *Take* your children back.' The cousin had no idea what he meant, but she was very frightened and she gathered up her babies."

"Next came the selection. Olga, Mother and I stayed together in one row. Then we had to go between a double row of SS guards. At the head of this double column was a very

handsome man pointing right and left, right and left. That was Dr. Mengele. He was in charge of selection for life or death, but of course we didn't know that. When our turn came and we went up to him, he looked at us and asked in German, "How old are you?" I remembered the fear in that boy's eyes and I lied. I said I was sixteen. Olga lied, too, and mother. Then he looked at Olga and me again and asked, 'Are you twins.' For a moment I wanted to joke, have a good time and say, 'Yes, we're twins,' but again I remembered the fear in the eyes of the man in striped pajamas. I said no, and that was the truth. He waved us on to the right. The cousin with her children went to the left. We never saw them again."

Mom does not bother to explain to me what I already know by this time, that right means life, left means death; that twins were sought by Mengele for use in painful experiments, performed without the benefit of anesthesia, supposedly in the name of science; that if you were too young (below sixteen) or too old (above forty), you were considered useless to the German war effort and fed to the waiting fires.

With his cryptic bursts of information, the man in striped pajamas saved three lives that day, my mother's, aunt's, and grandmother's. Had he explained the situation more fully, they would not have believed. He convinced them with the visible language of fear.

When Did You First Know?

"Grandmother, when did you first realize you were in trouble, that they were killing the Jews."

"I realized it as soon as I got off the train, the very first minute."

"How could you tell?"

"The smoke, the stench. I knew. Believe me I worried. On the first day, Gail, they gave us postcards to write. You had to fill them out and send them to somebody at home. I thought, 'I'm not going to send the card to anyone Jewish.' I knew that that way they could catch more people. So I picked the biggest anti-Semite in town, a farmer, Crajnik was I think his name, and sent them all to him. 'Dear Crajnik,' I wrote, 'How we miss you. How we wish you were here with us.' This I sent to him. Let's see how he explains to the Nazis how he has such good Jewish friends!"

And on another day:

"Grandmother, when was the first time you knew?"

"On the train already, in the box cars, I knew. The women there were talking."

"But what about Uncle Sandor. Do you remember talking to him?" I wanted to hear from her a version of a story about Sandor, my grandfather's brother, her brother-in-law, that I already knew from my mother. Sandor had made his way home from a work camp. Too weak to walk unassisted, he had given a gold ring to a peasant for the privilege of holding on to the side of his

cart while he walked. A gold ring just to hang on. In this way he returned home, bearing news. But Grandmother bristles at the very mention of Sandor.

"Sandor I never believed. He would not keep me, once, overnight for the Sabbath. I had no place to stay and had to walk the twelve kilometers home. I cried all the way."

"So, not a nice man."

"Not a nice man."

"But do you remember talking with him once in your kitchen, after Grandpop left."

"No. . . . Yes, yes." And between that no and that yes, I could see her eyes locate that year, that day, and the very kitchen in which she and Sandor sat talking over the scrubbed wooden table. She still had enough wheat in the pantry, herring in the jar by the front door, chickens in the yard, apples in the orchard to make what he said next seem impossible, like discovering that your sugar bowl is filled with blood.

"He said . . . he was given . . . a shovel, taken to a field with other Jews, and told to dig. He dug. Then more Jews were brought in and shot into the pit. He had to throw the earth on top of them."

"And did you believe him?"

"No, no. I did not believe him. Nu, this is the life."

I gave my Aunt Olga a call to find out when she, a sixteen-year-old at the time, had first understood that Birkenau was a death camp.

"You know, dear, I was a year older than your mother, and I was very sick at the time. Any disease, you name it, I had it -- scabies, scarlet fever, typhoid, typhus, pneumonia, and something itchy called "ricz" in Hungarian. Grandmom had a friend there in C-lager, a woman who was a doctor, and she came to see me. She explained to me why it was very important that I not stay in the hospital in Auschwitz. 'Don't go to the hospital,' she said. 'They kill you there.' She stole an aspirin for my benefit. There was no other medicine available in the camp. This doctor was a very kind woman. She examined me carefully, then said to me, 'Remember, Olga, when you get home, be sure to tell the doctor that you had pleurisy.' This gave me hope that I would survive."

* * *

"Mom, when did you first realize they were killing all the Jews?"

"This I discovered on my last day in Auschwitz."

"You never noticed the smell of the burning bodies?"

"Sure, I noticed it. But Mother said, 'Children, there are a lot of people here. Where there's a lot of people, there's a lot of trash. They are burning the trash."

"And you believed her?"

"Of course! I never questioned anything she said. You have to understand, I was very overprotected. Never was there a more naive child. At home, I never heard of rape, sex, never saw scenes of violence on a TV or on the news, never heard of one person killing another person for no reason at all. So how would I imagine what was happening here? You couldn't imagine it."

"On our last day in Auschwitz, we were again on the train platform waiting to be taken out for labor. While we were waiting, I saw Mother talking to one of her cousins who was there, but I wasn't close enough to hear what was being said. Then I saw something I had never seen before. 'Olga, look at Mother's hair,' I said. Mother's hair was still very short from being cut, and now it stood up all around her head, like a porcupine's quills. The cousin said something to her that frightened her badly. I never found out what it was. On the road nearby I saw a truck, not far from where I stood. A canvass tarp hung down in the back. I was curious, so I sneaked up to the truck and when no one was looking -- I lifted up the flap. Facing me, stacked neatly like logs, were the dead bodies of young, healthy girls, healthy dead bodies, all nude, their toes all pointing toward me. And that's when I knew. They were killing all of us. Not just those who were starved out and sick. All the Jews."

An Ordinary Room

I wondered whether Mom could recognize the buildings that still formed a part of the landscape of her tales. Sitting in the Italian restaurant, I riffled through my stack of snapshots from my trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau until I located one of an ordinary, low brick building with a gray roof sloped to accommodate the winter snows of Poland. Tall windows pierce the facade at even intervals. I had looked into the window by the door and seen what had been the undressing room, a large, bare, white space, filled with late-afternoon light. The double door to the right of the window is shut now, and a profusion of weeds and white wild flowers in bloom block the path and partly cover the entrance. They are knee high and filled with small life: dragon flies, droning

bees, gnats, a shy toad. Behind the building is a stand of trees, barbed wire, and a guardhouse with its peaked roof. Fifty-three years have passed since my mother has seen this building. Pushing back my plate of tiramisu, I raise an eyebrow and hold up the snapshot.

"OK, Mom. What's this one?" She takes the photo from me and gives it a glance.

"My God, that's the place where we had our hair cut, isn't it? That's the door where we went in."

That is the door. The building looks unremarkable: bland, with broad chambers, plain benches, white walls. It is quiet and empty now. The building, known as the "Sauna," or bath house, had a function beyond its official purpose of registration and disinfection: transformation -- the stripping away of humanity and identity, the uprooting of the heart. In this building, it was always morning, the time of showering, combing, dressing, preparing for a new day, but for each of these acts of self-definition, the Nazis constructed a demonic inversion.

"There is no way to tell you about this," Mother tells me, "about the noise, the screams. People were very modest then. No one ever saw a mother naked, or a sister. They told us to take off our clothes, fold them neatly, and leave them on the bench; we would get them again after our showers. I was suspicious about this. How would we find our stuff again? The room was huge, all places looked the same. No one wanted to undress. But some Jewish girls with sticks, the kapos, shouted in German to get undressed, schnell, schnell -- everything had to be done quickly -- or we would be beaten. It wasn't the kapos' fault. The Nazis were there, walking up and down, observing, ordering. And girls were beaten. The kapos beat anyone standing near them who did not move quickly enough. Such screaming: the kapos yelling, the beaten crying. I wasn't

standing near the kapos, so I was never touched, myself, but I saw them beating. I didn't want to get undressed. I can't describe to you the feeling of modesty that you have if you've never been naked in front of anyone. It was the most horrible feeling I ever experienced in my life. Except for what happened next.

"We were taken to a room and given showers, a large room with shower heads everywhere, and we had a hot shower. We had to run through. No soap, no towels at the end of it. In the next room, we had to sit down on benches and have our hair cut, but not a normal hair cut, no. We were shorn almost completely bald. Some had pieces of hair left that stuck out here and there, or a stripe. People couldn't find each other, no one could recognize anyone else, thousands of us, all the same. They hollered for their loved ones: 'Marishka! Tuba! Juzhike!' I yelled, 'Mother, where are you?' I couldn't see myself, but I saw in my sister's face what I looked like. I felt unspeakable shock, horror. I couldn't recognize myself, I couldn't think, it wasn't me. My sister was not my sister; my mother was not my mother. It was like a nightmare and all of a sudden we began to look like the maniacs we thought were from the insane asylum.

"We never did get our own clothing back. Instead, I was given a cotton shirt, like a striped pajama top, but with a big square shape cut out of the back, and a black square patch sewn on instead so the guards will see, wherever you are, that you're a prisoner. I was given one high-heeled shoe and one low-heeled shoe. Poor Olga got a pair of wooden shoes, like the Dutch wear. It was very difficult to walk in them. These were all the clothing I had for the full year I was in the camps. I was liberated in these clothes."

"How about underwear?"

"No underwear."

"How about a winter coat when it got cold?"

"A winter coat! Ha!"

On Ice

Mom always looks impish when she explains why neither she, nor her mother, nor her sister has a number tattooed on her arm.

"I always hated needles. When I was a little girl, a doctor came to give me an injection. I ran away from him with the needle still sticking out of my arm. So when I was in Auschwitz and I saw the woman sitting at a table with a needle for the tattoos, I got ready to flee. The line was enormous, people everywhere. Whenever we got close to the front of the line, I would run to the back again, and Mother would chase me, and Olga would chase her. Then back in the line, again and again until finally, they gave out all the numbers. We never got any."

Those without numbers were not officially registered to work. They were taken to C-lager, known as the Hungarian women's camp. C-lager was an enormous waiting room. There Jewish women waited, grew thin, and waited some more to be selected either for labor or for death. In Nazi parlance, the women here were "on ice." Precisely how they would be used was not yet determined, but since they were not being used as labor in or around Auschwitz-Birkenau, they were not officially property of the camp, as were those with numbers on their arms who worked. Perhaps it was for this reason that living conditions were bad here, even by the standards

of the inmates. Why feed someone bound for the gas or for labor elsewhere, in one of the camps in Germany? Food in C-lager was scant.

Bread and Soup

"Shall I tell you a typical day in Auschwitz now?"

We settle down for our narrative ritual.

The story about being in C-lager isn't really a story so much as a branching maze or mosaic of tales that hook together this way or that. The tales can be told in almost any order at all because there was no time at all in C-lager beyond a period known as "at first" and another one called "later." Days in C-lager all followed the roughly the same pattern: Wait for roll call, wait for soup, wait for bread, wait for sleep. Wait to see whether on this day you will be selected. Mom's account of camp routine always begins with morning.

"We got up early, about 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, and then stood in line until we were all counted."

"How long did this take?"

"It took as long as it took. It could be hours, three, four, five. Every single body, warm or cold, had to be found and counted, including those who died in the bunks at night or those who

touched the wire. That's how every day began, with bodies lying by the electrified barbed-wire fence. If you didn't want to live, you could just walk over and touch the wire."

"Did you ever think of suicide?"

"No, not then."

"Why not?" I am seated behind a plate of bow-tie cookies and a glass of milk.

"I was with my family, and that was all I wanted. And besides, I might get a piece of bread that day. There were the rumors, too, that kept me alive, rumors about the war. We heard that the Americans were in the war now, and the Germans were losing. It was like . . . candy; it gave us hope. Hold out, hold out, we told each other, the Americans are coming and we're going to be liberated. Cities were named. The news spread through us like wildfire."

"Where did this news come from?"

"A general whispering. Some of the girls were maids to the SS. . . . Later on, though, when we were already workers in Altenburg, I did think of suicide. It was May, 1945, and so beautiful. The trees were starting to bloom, everything was coming to life, and I thought I would just burst if I couldn't get out of there. I told Mother, 'I'm going to kill myself if I can't escape.' Mother didn't try to stop me from escaping, so I made my plans. But just about that time, though, the Americans started bombing.

"Shall I go back to the typical day? After everyone was counted, we were given a bitter sort of coffee to drink. I always wondered if it were drugged. Everybody stopped menstruating, and I had such a hard time remembering things. After a while, I couldn't remember my best friend's name. I sat in my bunk all day, trying and trying to remember. Nothing. So then I became really worried. What if I couldn't remember my own name? I worked hard at

remembering it. I told myself, 'You have to remember it not just for today, but for tomorrow, too.'

> *Dr. Myklos Nyiszli, himself a Hungarian Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, describes the effects of poor diet on the women of C-lager, where his wife and daughter had been interred:*
>
> *"The food they received, more like dirty dishwater than anything else, was sufficient to keep them from dehydrating, insufficient to keep them really alive. . . . The absence of fats made their bodies swell. Their menstruations ceased. . . . The lack of Vitamin B caused perpetual drowsiness and partial amnesia: often they could no longer remember the names of the streets where they had once lived, or their house numbers." (Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account, p. 151-152.)*

"Did I describe C-lager to you? As far as you could see, as far as the sky went, the barracks went. To the left, I could see a huge tall chimney in the distance. In the daytime it just looked smokey, but at nighttime when the sun went down, you could see the flames shooting up very high. All around us was an electrified barbed-wire fence. If you touched it, you would be electrocuted. The barracks were dark, with doors at both ends. Inside, the bunks were in triple tiers. Twelve girls slept in each bed. But when I say "bed," you mustn't think of an American bed with pillows and blankets. We had nothing: no mattress, no covers, just the plain wooden boards.

In the center of the block was a something like a pipe, a brick structure about two feet high, that divided the room in half. Maybe that contraption was meant as a stove for heating, but I never saw a fire there.

"When we first arrived, the girls in the barracks spoke to each other. 'Where are you from?' they'd ask. I especially remember one woman who had just been married. She said, 'What would my husband say if he could see me now!' But after the first day, people spoke less and less. Finally there was only silence, silence and crying.

"The food was unimaginable. That bitter coffee in the morning, then for lunch a piece of bread with maybe something smeared on it if you were lucky, some margarine or a piece of sausage. The bread was not like a real bread, more like sawdust, but we could never get enough of it. The loaves were small, about the size of a honey cake, and were cut into four to six slices each. The blockelteste had the heartbreaking job of dividing this bread equally among all the women. You had to be an artist. Each of us got only one thin slice. Once in a while we got some delicious liverwurst. I looked for this delicious liverwurst when we got to the States, but I never found anything like it again. Dinner was a thin, watery soup with a bad smell. On the first day, we were given some terribly smelly cheese. We couldn't eat it, and at first we thought of digging a hole in the ground and burying it because we were afraid the Nazis would punish us for throwing it away. Very quickly, though, we realized how hungry people were, and we gave the food away.

When we first arrived, there were some women there from Poland, from the Lodz ghetto, who were really hungry. One of them approached me -- it must have been one of our first few days there, because I still couldn't eat the food -- and asked me in Yiddish if she could have the

soup, our daily dinner. I said, 'I'd be glad to give it to you, but you have no bowl.' I had learned already that you had to keep your bowl. Without it, you couldn't eat. We purchased the bowl with a piece of our bread, just one bowl for the three of us, me, Mother, and Olga. We had to take turns drinking from it. The woman from Lodz took off her muddy wooden clog. 'Here,' she said, 'you can pour the soup into my shoe.' I did, and she drank from the shoe. I was horrified. I had never seen real hunger before.

Aunt Olga, too, remembers the bread and soup. "The bread, she tells me, "was like a black, black square. The soup was empty, but sometimes, if you were lucky, a vegetable turned up in it, a potato or a turnip, from the bottom of the vat. Mother used to badger the woman in charge of ladling out the soup: 'Can't you push the ladle in deeper?' 'But, there's nothing in the soup, nothing,' the woman in charge would say. Once, though, I found a comb in the soup. Who knows? Maybe they swept the garbage from the boxcars into the pot."

Three Auschwitz Recipes

Bread:

Wild chestnuts and sawdust.

(Reported by Dr. Nyiszli, a Hungarian Jewish survivor, in Auschwitz, A Doctor's Eyewitness Account, p. 28)

Soup:

A few potatoes

A bit of margarine

75 gallons of water

Some kind of flour with a nasty taste

(Reported by Magda Szabo, who worked in the kitchen of C-lager.

See The Auschwitz Album, p. 124.)

"Surprise Soup":

Olga Lengyel, a survivor from Rumania, lists items that were found in the soup:

Buttons

Tufts of hair

Rags

Tin cans

Keys

Mice

A metal sewing kit, including needles and thread

(Reported in Lengyel's book Five Chimneys, p. 37.)

Imaginary Cooking

About twenty years ago, Grandmother and I sat in her two-room apartment on 22nd St, downtown in Philadelphia. She had made fried chicken livers and boiled potatoes for our lunch. They were sauted with onions and paprika to produce an exquisite texture and flavor that I've never been able to duplicate. I was supremely happy. Suddenly, Grandmother began to tell me a story of Auschwitz. Never before this time had she spoken to me of the camps.

"You know, Gail, when we were in Auschwitz, we were all very hungry, and the women were talking. We were talking about how we would cook chicken livers. One woman said she would bake them, and another that she would cook them up with onions. Another said she would serve hers with mashed potatoes, and another would stuff dough with the liver, like a kreplach. Finally I said, 'Enough cooking, already!'" Grandmother laughed. "Nu, that is the life."

Olga, too, remembers imaginary cooking.

"We were always cooking in Auschwitz. You can't imagine! Women would sit and share recipes. 'When I get home, I'm going to make chicken. When I get home, I'm going to make chopped eggs. When I get home, I'm going to make cholent.' And they'd tell all the ingredients. Each recipe always began, 'When I get home.'"

Eyes and Mirrors

"We couldn't eat the food at the beginning," Olga tells me. "I asked a woman, 'How can you eat this?' She said, 'Just wait.' One day Lenka looked at me. We had no mirrors, you know. She said, 'Only your eyes are still you.' Flesh was disappearing along with strength."

Selections

Selections were the chief terror of the ordinary day in C-lager.

"Selections took place twice a day," Mom explained, "during morning and evening roll calls, sometimes more often. They were always done in the nude, in all weather. Very often it was Dr. Mengele himself who did the selecting, accompanied by Irma Grese. Oh, she was such a beauty, beautifully fitted clothes, spotlessly clean. They walked along the rows of shivering skeletons and sometimes Mengele would pause and say, "You, out! Schnell!" He would point, and Irma Grese would point. I could feel the terror all around me. When I first arrived at C-lager, someone told me, 'Don't worry about the selections. Only the Musselmans get selected.' The musselmans were the people who were starved out, but not just starved out, because we all were, eventually. The musselmans were the ones who had lost the will to live. You could tell who they were, because they completely stopped taking care of themselves. Mother made a rule, right away. We were going to bathe daily, no matter what. And we did. We hardly had any water, but we bathed. We would use a portion from our water supply to wash at least our hands and face. Mother also managed to get one toothbrush for us."

"How on earth did she manage to get a tooth brush?"

"Probably with a piece of bread. The bathing helped keep us alive. It kept us human. But after a while, you starve and you look starved. There is no flesh on your body anymore. I looked at mother and Olga, and I knew what a skeleton looked like. I saw that their knees were wider than their thighs, and I knew that I must look that way, too. I learned anatomy in Auschwitz."

"How does it feel to starve?"

"You can see a skeleton and see that they're hungry, but you can't know what it feels like until you are that skeleton. What does hunger feel like? You feel it in your bones, you feel it in your teeth, you feel it in your gums, you feel it in your dreams. I was a skeleton, and I was terrified of being selected."

"You didn't know about the gas chambers, though."

"I had no idea. It wasn't the gas chambers that I was afraid of. I just didn't want to be separated from my mother and Olga. Once during a very long roll call, I was doing badly. I felt very, very weak and dizzy. I collapsed. The Nazis were already coming up our row, counting and selecting. If they had seen me there on the ground, I would have been selected out. A girl standing next to me in the line reached down and put a small piece of bread into my mouth. That small bread crumb gave me such joy, that --whoops!-- I straightened right up and chewed on it. The girl who gave me the bread to save my life was a stranger.

"Did you thank her?"

"I don't even remember seeing her. Not all the selections were bad. Some were for labor. You could look and see what kind of people they were selecting, and if it looked good, you could try to be selected, too. They had a selection once, at the beginning, for showers. All three of us

were selected. We went, and we really did get showers. We left C-lager and walked on a road that ran between the lagers. As we walked, we tried to locate my brothers, but we never could. Along the way, the old-timers shared rumors with us. Someone pointed out a lager where, she said, American prisoners were being held. Another lager, we were told, held the Russians. Conditions with them were so terrible, they were so starved, that they had resorted to cannibalism. We heard that they cooked their meals in a human skull.

Most of the time, though, we tried to stay away from the selections.

Waiting

"We stood in lines endlessly: to be counted, to be selected, to use the bathroom, to receive our soup. Beyond that, there wasn't much to do in C-lager. And I was so sleepy so much of the time, so very sleepy. Sometimes, though, I would sneak out of the barrack when I wasn't supposed to and I would see things."

"You were a curious teenager."

"No, I had diarrhea! The blockelteste would let me sneak out. The bathroom was in the block right next door. Once, when I was out there, I saw a train come in. Usually when trains came in, they would have an "all alarm," and we would all have to go into the barracks and stay there. This time, though, I was out. A train came into the station. In it were children, beautifully dressed children. The clothes were so lovely I guessed that the children must be from France. Not a single adult with them. They must all have gone straight to the gas chambers. Another time I looked down the train tracks, to the left, and I could see there a woman being torn by a dog. I

saw a man hanging once, too, across the Lager Strasse, the street between C-lager and Lager D. There were men in Lager D. But most of the time, I read.

"You read? Wait a minute. Where could you have gotten a book in C-Lager?

"I don't know. Maybe Mother got it for me, somehow. Perhaps she purchased it with a piece of bread. Maybe it was left behind by someone who was selected and never returned. It was a copy of The Count of Monte Christo in Hungarian. I read that book while I was in Auschwitz, but I read it so slowly that it took the entire time that I was there to finish it, five months. The book was about escape and revenge. I loved it."

About the Hanging Man

During my trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the guide showed me a spot in D-lager, across the Lagerstrasse from C-lager where Edek Golinski, a Polish prisoner, had been hanged. Edek and Mala Zimetbaum, a Jewish woman, had fallen in love and escaped from Auschwitz together. After a week or so, they were recaptured, tortured and executed. Mala was executed in BI, the lager for women laborers in Birkenau. Edek was hanged across the tracks in the men's lager. His body may have been the one that my mother saw.

Books in Birkenau

With a few exceptions, reading was forbidden in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Jewish prisoners who unloaded the gas chambers and fed the crematorium furnaces, the Sonderkommando, were permitted to read and had access to the books that Jews brought with them to the camp from all over Europe. Books in Hungarian must have been plentiful during the period that my mother was there. Like vodka, books could be used as an anodyne, and in order to keep functioning, the members of the Sonderkommando -- who daily pulled the bodies from the gas chambers -- needed an anodyne. They drank, they read, all with the blessings of the SS. *But for others in the camp, it was different. Dr. Nyiszli, a member of the Sonderkommando, speaks of the punishments for reading that befell slave laborers:*

> *In the KZ [concentration camp] anyone caught reading was punished with twenty days' solitary confinement, in a sort of sentry box large enough to stand up in. Unless, of course, the blows dealt him beforehand had already killed him. (Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account p. 44)*

Who knows whether or not this rule applied as well to inmates of C-lager. Perhaps not, since they were not laborers. At any rate, Mom read her book unmolested.

In the Czech family camp, just on the other side of the fence from Lager C, the Czech Jews from Terezin had acquired eight books for their children.

> *"Every evening," states scholar Nili Keren, "the books were locked in the room of the block elder, together with other valuables, such as medicines. These priceless objects . . . [were hidden] in a different place every night . . ." ("The Family Camp" Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp p. 434)*

Mom's priceless book was never taken from her, never stolen. She left it on her bunk when it was time for roll call. It waited there for her when she came back. No one else seemed to be interested in it. Eventually, she lost track of it, after having read it cover to cover. Perhaps it was left behind during the final selection in C-lager.

The Concert

Mom and I are taking a walk around my neighborhood. It is a lazy summer day. We admire the greenery, the neat beds of flowers, and chat about Auschwitz.

"Next door to us was B-lager. This is where they kept all the Czech Jews who had been in Teresin ghetto. Your grandmother's sister, Herminka, was taken to Teresin. She played the violin. But she wasn't brought to Auschwitz. She died in Sobibor. Did I tell you about her daughter, Milatka? Milatka is still alive. Herminka was married to Uncle Dvorak. He was a convert to Judaism. When they saw what was happening with the Nazis, they took their

daughter, Milatka, to Dvorak's sister to hide her on her farm. Milatka was a beautiful child with blond, curly hair. The sister hid her under the chicken coop. Beneath the boards they had made a hiding place for her. Then they went home and placed an ad in the paper saying that their daughter had been kidnapped and offering a reward for information. In this way, they kept Milatka safe. Herminka died in the war; Dvorak and Milatka both survived. Grandmother thinks that Dvorak's sister was the one who betrayed Herminka, because she wanted to keep the child."

"Now how could Grandmother know a thing like that?"

"She says she knows."

We pause to admire marigolds.

"The Czech Jews in B-lager, next door, seemed to have different conditions from us. Men, women, and children lived there all together. Families were not broken apart. They were allowed to keep their own clothing. Nobody had cut their hair. They looked beautiful, and I was a bald manikin in a sea of bald manikins. But they were far, far hungrier than we were. A number of us girls, newly arrived in C-lager, decided to pass our food over to them. Now this wasn't easy. We had metal bowls, and remember, the fence was electrified. The strands of barbed wire weren't all that far apart, maybe five inches. You had to slip your hand with the bowl through the barbed wire, turn your wrist, carefully pour the soup into the other person's bowl, then turn the bowl upright and carefully pull it back between the electrified wires. (Mother demonstrates this gesture as she speaks, advancing her had between invisible strands of barbed wire.) It was important not to lose your bowl. The girls and I did this several times. One day, I was pouring

my soup into someone else's bowl when I heard something in C-lager that I had never heard there before: silence. Complete silence. Instantly, I knew that something was wrong. I looked up and there was a Nazi guard, getting ready to kick me into the fence. Well, quick as a flash, I poured the soup, turned my wrist, pulled out my bowl, and vanished into the crowd. The Nazi did try to kick me, but he missed and fell down. By the time he was able to get up and look for me, I was gone.

"On yet another day, I saw some small children near the fence, and I wanted to pass my cheese to them, the smelly cheese that I couldn't eat yet. I pushed my hand through the space between the wires and gave the cheese to an older woman who was standing there. I asked her if she would please pass it on to the children. Now, this woman had white hair pulled back into a bun. Her face was elongated, regular, absolutely beautiful, but heartbreakingly sad. She wore a magnificent long dress. I'll never forget what she said to me next. She had tears in her eyes and she told me, "Even old people are hungry."

"Did she pass the food on to the children?"

"I don't know. I was so shocked. I assumed that the children were hers, since they stood near her. I couldn't imagine a mother who would refuse to feed her children. I ran away and cried. Now I know that the children could not have been hers."

> *I'll take a moment to defend the woman with the white bun. Mom couldn't have known what the older woman knew: that the Jews in B-lager had starved in the Terezin ghetto before they starved in Auschwitz; that the rations in B-lager had been cut to the bone in order to feed people in lager C -- there wasn't enough*

food allotted to feed both groups; that the children in B-lager had special circumstances and did in fact receive more food than usual, more food than the adults -- sometimes they were even given sugar or white bread. The woman with the white bun may not have been a mother, but she was no monster.

"The people in B-lager were grateful for the food we passed to them, and to thank us, they gave us a concert. It was their last. The musicians lined up in the space between the barracks and the barbed wire fence, just across from my barrack. There were not many of them, a few violins, maybe a cello, but how beautifully they played! As soon as the Nazis saw them playing there, they rushed at us and forced us to go indoors. But they let the musicians keep playing, and they left the doors of our barracks open. That afternoon, we sat and listened to the concert. I don't know what they played, but after the war when your father played Dvorak's "New World Symphony" for me on his record player, I felt so very sad when I heard the slow movement, such a sweet sadness. Tears came to my eyes. Perhaps that is what they played.

After the Concert

"That evening, they called an "all alarm." The kapos all rushed about with their clubs shrieking 'Ruhe, ruhe,' and forced everybody in C-lager into the barracks. The doors were shut tight. Guards were posted at each entrance. In our bunks, we lay in the darkness, listening. Through the walls of the barrack we could hear screams and cries coming from the direction of B-

lager. I was very frightened. The next morning early, the Kapo let me sneak out to the bathroom. Across the wires, I could see that B-lager was empty, completely empty. Not a soul was there. On the ground I saw dishes . . . shoes . . . glasses . . . clothing -- signs of last night's violence. Nobody seemed to know where the Jews of Terezin had gone."

"Did you ask what had happened?"

"Who do you ask? Thirty-two thousand zombies? You can't ask the lagerelteste. She always shouts, 'Ru-he, ru-he!' Can you ask a person like that? She always said they were taken for work."

The Jews of Terezin

Terezin, also known in German as Theresienstadt, was a ghetto housing privileged Jews of Czechoslovakia, the famous, the rich, or veterans of World War I. The Germans conceived of it as a "model" camp and used it to show outsiders how well Jews in camps were treated by their German hosts. The propaganda film, "Hitler Gives the Jews a City" was filmed here. In fact, conditions were harsh, starvation, overcrowding, and disease being common. When facilities became too congested, surplus Jews were whisked away to Auschwitz, to B-lager, where they were given the designation SB6: sonderbehandlung (special handling), six months. They were given six months to live in Auschwitz. Then they were gassed. The first group, gassed on March 7, 1944, sang the Czech national anthem and Hatikvah (Hope) while they stood in

the undressing room attached to the gas chamber. The second group, including the musicians my mother heard, was "liquidated" on July 12, 1944. After a selection for workers, the remainder of the people were gassed.

Of the approximately 141,000 Jews who passed through the gates of Terezin, only about 16,800 survived the war.

Learning to Fear Honey

"Later that summer, we heard about the Gypsies. We heard that one night they were all given honey, and the next day they were all taken to be gassed. I thought to myself, 'So long as nobody gives me honey, I'll be safe.' And no one ever did give me honey, so I slept soundly."

The Fate of the Gypsies

On August 2, 1944, 2,897 Gypsies were taken from E-lager in Birkenau and gassed. Dr. Nyiszli, a Jewish Hungarian survivor also in Auschwitz at the time, reports that they were given bread and salami to calm them the night before the gassing.

Cooking for Olga

"Olga was sick almost the entire time she was in the camps, so I tried to get extra food for her. As often as I could, I would go to the garbage cans, looking for scraps. Now, the garbage cans were outside the kitchen, all the way at the other end of the lager, near the gate, so going there was dangerous. I could get trapped in a selection, or, if I got caught by a Nazi or a kapo, I could get a beating. But I was never caught. From these cans, sometimes I was able to get a few potato peels or other scraps.

"One day, as I was going through the garbage cans, I ran into Erica. Erica was a schoolfriend of mine. Her family had lived in Slovakia, and when the Slovakian Jews were taken to the camps, she fled to a distant relative in the Carpathians. Erica's father, a dentist, sent money to support her, but when the checks stopped coming, the relative threw Erica out. We took her in while we were under house arrest. She lived with us and ate our food all that time. I don't remember, now, how we were separated, but here she was in Auschwitz, looking plump and healthy. She had on shiny boots, a skirt, and a white blouse. Can you imagine! She had gained fifteen pounds since the last time I saw her. Apparently, she was now the assistant of a Sloviakian kapo whom she had known before the war. This was an extremely good position, because the kapos saw to it that they and their friends could scoop up whatever was left at the bottom of the cooking vats. I decided to see if she could help me get some more food for Olga.

"Erica, Olga is very sick. Can you help us get more food? She will die if you don't help us."

Erica said to me, "There is nothing I can do for you." To this day, I cannot forgive her for those words. And you know, in those days, I was simply afraid that Olga would starve. I didn't yet understand that starvation could lead to selection for the gas chambers. . . . 'There is nothing I can do for you.'

"I volunteered once for drek patrol. They needed volunteers to help empty out the toilets. This was a very bad job. They gave you buckets and you had to scoop out the toilets. Those toilets were like a long concrete slab with holes to sit on. You sat over the holes, and there was a pit dug out beneath. Now the pit was full and had to be emptied. Everybody in the camp had diarrhea, so you can imagine. I volunteered for that job, but then I disappeared. I came back, though, just in time to get paid: an extra piece of bread!

"And once I decided to volunteer to carry the big vats of soup from the cooking block to the barracks. I could earn extra bread this way. But I waited to see what the work would be like. I saw that only two girls were assigned to each huge vat. The vats were some kind of metal, maybe iron, and came up from the ground almost to my shoulders. The workers had to carry them either by their two handles or hanging from poles. I didn't think I would be strong enough to balance and carry those huge pots, so I developed a method of theft instead. At every barrack, the kapos would guard the vats of soup before the official distribution time and beat anyone who tried to approach. Sometimes, one of the starving women would try openly to take some of the soup. Poor souls. The kapo beat them bitterly. I would stand behind the kapo, and when they were busy beating the thief, I would dart in, dip some soup from the pot with my bowl, and dash off again before the kapo noticed. This system had an added advantage: I could get the food to

Olga earlier than usual. Since we were at the far end of C-lager, usually we had to wait about two hours for the food to get to us. I did this several times while Olga was ill, but as soon as she was a bit better, I stopped. The risk of being beaten by the kapo's stick was too great.

"One day Tubi, your Grandmother's youngest sister, came to us. She was working in 'Kanada,' the part of the camp where the Nazis took all the goods that they had stolen from the people on the train. This was considered a very good job in Auschwitz. It was indoors, so you were protected from the weather, and if you were careful, you could get extra food there, or things to trade. Tubi worked there, sorting clothes. That's how we know about my grandmother's death, my mother's mother, Edda. My grandmother had a little checked vest that she always wore, to keep warm. She always had it on. As Tubi was sorting through the clothing, she found her mother's vest. That's how we found out that my grandmother had been taken to Auschwitz and gassed.

"I saw Tubi one day through the electrified barbed wire fence that separated C-lager from B. I don't know how she was able to get there, but she had brought us a bowl of soup. As she passed it to us through the barbed wires, her hands shook. She also gave us two small potatoes. I went back to that spot by the fence for several days, but that was the only time that Tubi was able to come. I never forgot that kindness from Tubi, those two little potatoes. I decided to cook a potato soup for Olga.

"Mom, how did Tubi manage to find you?"

"People were gathered all along the fence between B-lager and C-lager, when we found out there were Czech Jews there. People called out, 'Is anybody here from such and such a

town?' When I heard, 'Is anybody here from Szollos,' I said, 'I'm from Szollos.' And that's how I found Tubi, who was looking for my mother. Once she saw me, she left and came back right away with the potatoes."

"Once I had the potatoes, I got some paper and some wood chips to make a fire.

"Where on earth did you get paper and wood chips?"

"I got them. I told people I was making a soup for my sick sister, and people gave me whatever they could, little scraps of paper, anything they had that would burn. A match I got from a smoker, or maybe she let me light my piece of paper when she lit her cigarette. Then I borrowed a knife from someone and sliced the potato really thin so it would cook quickly. I knew how to build a fire because I used to watch the Gypsies. I put two stones or sticks on the ground for my pot to rest on. Then I lit my fire beneath it. I used the metal soup bowl for my pot and made my fire outside, between two barracks, so the guard wouldn't see me, and started my soup. But after a while, the guard did see the smoke from my fire, and shot at me. At first I ran away as quickly as I could. But then I came back and grabbed my pot of potato soup while the guard was still shooting. I didn't drop it. The potato was only half cooked, but the liquid was boiling. You know, the pot never burned my hands.

A Separation

"Once, when Olga was very sick, Mother tried to send me for a selection. That was horrible for me, such a nightmare. It was shortly before the liquidation of C-lager. I think Mother

talked to the lager eldeste. Maybe she heard rumors that they were going to kill all of us and realized that Olga could never be selected for anything good. Olga had scarlet fever at the time and was covered with red skin hanging down in patches. She could hardly stand. No one would pick her for labor. Mother decided to stay with her and send me to a selection where they were choosing beautiful women. There had been selections like that one before, but Mother had never sent me. When the lager eldeste approached and asked for volunteers for work, Mother made me volunteer. I didn't want to leave. She said, 'I want you to go to that selection. I'll stay here with Olga. You're going to go and be selected for work and have a better life.' I refused to go, but Mother pushed me into that line and threatened to beat me up. She said to me, 'Get out of here. I want you to go. I want you to live.' Then she screamed at me, 'Get out! Get out!' There was no explanation, no hug, no kiss.

I had to go line up at a barrack, naked holding my clothes in my hand. I was so upset at being separated from Mother and Olga. I thought, 'She doesn't love me. She wanted me to go.' I was alone. I knew no one in that line. I felt inside so crushed, so upset. I never cried in Auschwitz, except then.

Then, one by one, all the women were taken to a small room in a barrack where an SS man nodded 'yes' or 'no.' When my turn came, I stood before the SS man naked, shaking violently. I couldn't stop crying. I felt tears going down my face, but I couldn't stop them. They wanted blue eyes and long fingers, pretending it was for labor. They made me hold my hands out. For the first time, I looked up at the SS man, and I looked him in the eye. His eyes were blue. My eyes were rolling big tears down my cheeks. Seeing me shaking and crying, the SS man shook his

head, 'no' and chased me away. He didn't want a crybaby on his team. I was overjoyed. I ran back to Mother and Olga.

"What do you think that selection was for?"

"Prostitution. . . . I had a friend, Lilly, a beautiful girl. She went once to that kind of selection: blue eyes, long fingers. She had told me that if they ever tried to take her for prostitution, she would touch the wire. Lilly didn't survive. And she had a better chance to survive than I did. She was plump when she arrived at Auschwitz; I was skinny.

The Brothel in Auschwitz

The brothel in Auschwitz was located in the building right next to the gate that announced, "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work makes you free). The women selected as prostitutes for the "puffkommando" had good food and clothing and were safe from the weather in a tastefully furnished, well-heated building. They had a better chance of surviving. Liana Millu describes the brothel in her book Smoke Over Birkenau. The building was "freshly painted and better kept than the rest. The porch was nice and neat, the windows sparkling clean and decorated with bright curtains" (165). Another survivor, Olga Lengyel, reports that "despite Nazi theories on racial pollution, we heard that a number of attractive internees were drafted for these brothels" (Five Chimneys 195). While scholars still disagree as to whether Jewish women were ever chosen for prostitution, the threat felt real to the inmates of Birkenau.

A Room Filled with Stairs

When Mom first came to the United States, a great number of things startled her: striped shirts, large dogs, Brownie uniforms -- in fact uniforms of any kind. But most of all, she was frightened by bleachers. She was unable to attend high school football games without a feeling of horror and could not climb the bleachers without a sense of panic. This panic was born during her last three days in Birkenau.

Mom and I had discussed these three days often, never in strict order. Sometimes the tales would pop up as we discussed moments of fear or luck or triumph. Sometimes they were grouped with accounts of the helpfulness of fellow inmates. It took me a while to figure out how all the tales hooked together, until finally we sat down one day with tea, coffee, paper, and pencil, and mapped out events and sites, taping one piece of paper to the next as the tales continued and the map expanded. Every place on the map was also a story.

Mom draws some train tracks, some barbed wire borders, and a rectangle to represent a barrack. She writes "ME" within the rectangle and circles it, then labels her sketch "C-lager":

"The last selection in C-lager took place about two weeks after Rosh Ha-Shanah. All the other barracks in C-lager were already empty. Only two were still occupied: ours and the one

right across from it. Then they called us out for a selection. This selection really terrified us because you couldn't escape it; there were too few people left. We were also terrified of being separated. Olga had had scarlet fever, and her skin was still hanging from her body in great patches. She looked terrible. Mother looked like a mother. The skin on her stomach hung like a flap. There were very few mothers left in C-lager by this time, maybe thirty-five or forty out of the two-thousand girls who were left. We had to take off our clothes and line up. At the head of the line was a little man with a neatly trimmed goatee, a German civilian in charge of selecting labor for a factory. He looked amazingly like my grandfather, my mother's father. (Mom places the German civilian on the map, in the clear area above the last barracks, between the washrooms and the latrines.) Pointing right or left, he helped the Nazis with the selection. As we approached, we had to hold up our hands so he could examine our fingers. He also asked if we had any problems with vision. Of course, no one did. All the people with glasses had been selected out a long time ago. (I needed glasses, you know. I had been given a pair when I was a girl in Czechoslovakia, but I didn't want to wear glasses and I threw them away. So I arrived in C-lager without glasses.) Well. I was ahead of Mother and Olga in the line, and I was selected for the right. Then, miracle of miracles, Olga was selected for the right, too, and stood by me, patchy red skin and all. We didn't know, then, if right was good or bad. But Mother had a rule for us. If two of us were selected to go in one direction, the third would try to go the same way. We would try to stay together.

"Next Mother came to the head of the line. The little old man with the goatee looked at her and --pointed to the left. I hoped and prayed that she would get back into the line and try again, and she did, not very far back, not at the end of the line. Just far enough back that she

would have several chances to go through the line and be selected. No good. She was sent to the left. Again and again, maybe a dozen times she got back into that line. Finally, the little man with the goatee recognized her. He pulled on his goatee and muttered, "Hnhhhh! Hnhhhh! . . . Hnhhhh! Hnhhhh!" The Nazis beat her up and sent her to the left for good. Few other women tried to go through the selection more than once. They no longer cared in what direction they went. Now we know that the ones sent to the right were selected for work. The rest would go to the gas chambers.

"That night, we were all still kept in C-lager. But the girls selected for work were kept in a separate barrack from the rest, here. (She draws an arrow to another barrack.) I chose a bunk near the door, at the top, so Mother could see us easily if she came. When they put us into our barrack, they had us count off, twelve to a bed. One after another, girls climbed up into the bunk. Then, when eleven people had gotten in there, I shouted, "That's it! We have twelve people up here!" I saved a space for Mother, just in case. I kept hoping she would come.

"That night, the women in the other barrack broke down the doors and escaped. They all wanted to rejoin their loved ones. (That kept people going, you know, being with someone. We heard that there was one woman there who had been a maid in a family. She stayed with the little girl from that family.) Women from the other barrack rushed to our barrack and broke in. The double-doors burst open, and the very first head I saw was Mother's. She spotted us right away and climbed up into the bunk with us. The other women also found their loved ones and climbed to join them. Then the Nazis came. Immediately, they did a head count. Any bunk where there were more than twelve heads, someone had to climb down. But in our bunk, the head count came

out right because I had saved a space for Mother. The rest of the women were taken out of the barrack again, but Mother was safe.

"When we arrived at Altenburg, our new labor camp, there was the same little man with the white goatee. He lined us up and looked at each of us in turn. When he got to the spot where Mother stood, he stopped. His mouth dropped open. "Ach, du wieder!" Oh, you again! he said. Then he kept tugging on his goatee, shaking his head and muttering, "Hnhhh! Hnhhh! Hnhhh!" But there she was, and there she stayed. Too late to get rid of her."

But before we could leave C-lager, another odd thing happened to us. The day after the last selection, we were marched out of C-lager and taken back to the train tracks. (She draws the gate to C-lager, and a line to show the direction of their walking.) Here we were put on a train, a real passenger train. -- Yes, this I remember because later, after we had left Auschwitz, there were in fact civilian passengers on this train with us. They kept asking the Nazi guards, "Who are these people?" We were as thin as skeletons. And the Nazis told them, "These are poor laborers going to work." -- The Nazis put us on that train. It sat on the tracks and then, after a while, they took us off again. This is when I saw that truckful of healthy dead bodies. You remember? We came down from the train and they marched us to the left side of the train tracks. We walked for a while until we came to a peculiar building. In the building was . . . nothing -- no bunks, nothing at all. Just a muddy floor and a roof and the rain pouring through. (She places the peculiar building on the map and labels it "mud.") Mother looked around. 'All right, children, pick the highest spot and start sleeping. We'll need rest for tomorrow.'

"We picked a corner that was a little higher, a little drier, and curled up together to sleep. All the girls slept here, squashed together in the mud. The Nazis gave us nothing to eat or drink that day. The next day, they marched us out again. They told us we would be taken for hot showers and clean clothes. Now as we were walking along the road, we saw the strangest sight: a beautiful little cottage with a white picket fence and flowers. But most amazing of all -- there, on the porch sat a little old lady, neat, well-fed, clean, rocking on a rocking chair. Can you imagine! None of us had seen an old woman for such a long time! There *were* no old women in Auschwitz. They had all been killed off. We all stared at her in amazement as we passed. We couldn't take our eyes off her. Even as we went forward, our heads turned back to take in this amazing sight, a little old lady on a rocking chair.

"We were herded into another building and told to take our clothes off, schnell, schnell, we were going to get a bath. We undressed in a large room and left our clothing and shoes on the benches. And now we really started to worry about Mother. We were afraid that the Nazis would see that she did not belong and kick her out. She was the only mother there. The rest of the girls were young, in their teens or early twenties. We had to pass by more Nazi guards, and here was Mother, saggy baggy like an elephant. She had had six children and she had lost a lot of weight in the camp. Her skin hung down in front in flaps. The girls near us immediately saw the problem. Without a word, they all gathered around Mother and shielded her naked body with theirs, so that the Nazis couldn't see her. And that's how we walked passed all the Nazi guards -- with Mother in the center of the cluster. There was no decision to do this, no consultation. We didn't ask them. I don't think we even thanked them. It was just a natural instinct they had to save a mother.

"In this way, we went down the corridor and around a corner to a little room. I never saw a room like this before. It was filled, from bottom to top, with wooden scaffolding, like stairs, or bleachers, almost up to the ceiling. (As she speaks, Mom draws a large oblong on the map, then fills it with lines to represent the steps.) The Nazis beat the girls at the bottom and forced them this way to climb up to get away from the blows. I never saw them like this before, striking out in all directions. From the pressure of all those girls being forced and beaten into the room, we found ourselves being pushed up the stairs. We ended up sitting about half way up toward the top. Then the Nazis slammed the door shut and locked it. I could see no window, and only the one door. We were trapped, about five-hundred to seven-hundred of us. Then someone yelled, "What's wrong with this room? There are pipes in here!" Panic broke out. People rushed to the door, but it was shut tight and would not budge. Maybe the lights went out then, or maybe I closed my eyes. I don't remember seeing.

Suddenly, somewhere outside, we heard an explosion. The door flew open, schnell, schnell, we were rushed back out of the room, into our clothes, and onto the train. We never did get a bath or a change of clothing.

When I was younger, I heard this tale with a great sense of triumph. Mom and I threw back our heads and laughed each time she cried out, "That's it! There are twelve people up here!" And I listened with awe to the account of the room with the stairs. Mom's quick thinking saved Grandmother once, the young women of C-lager protected her during her second moment of great danger, and finally, a mysterious explosion saved them all. Only much later did I begin to

hunt for this room and for the date of the explosion that freed them from it. What was the room with the stairs?

"Grandmother, do you remember being in a room filled with stairs before you left Auschwitz?"

"Yes, I remember. Like this it looked. (She held up her knife straight and angled her fork against it to form a triangular shape: scaffolding.) We had to climb up."

"What do you think it was?"

"Was the gas chamber. We were walking, and ahead of us I saw chimneys smoking. You can imagine how I felt, how I walked and prayed for my two daughters."

I gave my Aunt Olga a call. What would she remember about the last days in Auschwitz? She had had scarlet fever at that time.

Olga's Memory of the Last Selection in C-Lager

"C-lager was pretty much empty. Before, there were about 30,000. The barracks were filled with us crazy people. We looked like the people we thought were crazy when we arrived. At the end, the sections were going, and going, and going. Finally, they took us into a barrack. Before, we had discussed what we would do. We decided that wherever two go, the third would try to go, too. They said we were being selected for work. This man was doing the selecting. I would recognize him today if I ever saw his picture. I don't remember the order we went in, if

your mother went first or if I did. We had to go through the barrack in the nude. The German industrialist was selecting. He had a white goatee, very, very prosperous looking. Other Germans lined up there. Lenka went to one side, Grandmom to the other. I ended up on the same side as your Mom. Grandmom went through the line again. I was very glad to see her come. She was thrown to the left again. Do you know how they were selecting? They were looking at breasts, the only thing that was still firm. Grandmom was an older woman. Her breasts were sagging.

"They took those of us who were selected into a barrack, at the back near the wires, about three or four barracks away from where we had been. They said we would be taken to Germany. We knew the others would be taken to the crematorium. I was heartsick. "This is it! We'll never see Mother again," I thought. I headed for a bunk near the double door. Your mother said, "No, we're not taking the first bunk. We're taking the next one. We won't see Mother coming in the door. "My, God," I thought, "She's crazy. We'll never see Mother again."

"There were a few hundred of us. The blockelteste said you have to have twelve, twelve, twelve. Twelve girls in each tier of the bunk. We took the outside middle tier -- our heads were facing out so we could see Mother. The Germans counted us out. That night, all of a sudden the doors got squashed in. There was screaming. It was dark. The women selected for the gas chamber broke down the door. All of them. We grabbed Mother and stuck her in between us. Then the Germans came. Whoever came in, you must come out. We're going to count, and if you don't tell us who it is, <u>everybody</u> in the bunk will have to go out. But our headcount came out right. Everybody else was taken out. They walked the next day, on foot, to the crematorium.

"I never, ever thought we'd see Mother again. Lenka's perseverance and brains helped save her. Very few people there were still related at this point. If they thought you were related, they separated you."

"Yes, I remember the room with the stairs. We were in a building, not C-lager. Inside, we were squeezed in and pushed. There were spigots. 'They're going to gas us!' I thought. Inside, it was like a stadium, stairs straight up and down. They pushed us farther and farther in. There were pipes. I didn't know if for gas or for water. Then they said, 'Everybody out!' and marched us to the train."

Mom and Olga agreed. They had been in the gas chamber. People were panicked, they said. Someone saw pipes. They had never been treated so harshly before, never. They were beaten and pushed inside a room without windows. The door was locked. And what about the house with the flowers? or the little old lady in the rocking chair? These were distractions!

I wanted to know more about gas chambers. Did my family really survive a gas chamber? Which one was it? There were four at Birkenau. Did any have flowers in front? Did gas chambers have bleachers? I had never heard of a gas chamber having bleachers before. And what was that loud explosion? Could I date it?

As it turned out, pinpointing the date of the explosion was simple. All I had to do was look up what had blown up in or around Birkenau in the fall of 1944. History books announced

two bombings within earshot of the Birkenau barracks before October, one on August 20 and a second on September 13. On these dates, the Allies bombed Monowitz, an industrial plant run by I.G. Farben and dedicated to producing synthetic rubber. Monowitz sat only a very few miles away from Birkenau. Then, I remembered that the last selection at C-lager had taken place roughly two weeks after Rosh Ha-Shonah, the Jewish New Year. August 20 would be far too early for this holiday, but September 13 seemed like a possible date. My Aunt Olga recalls the New Year's celebration of 1944.

"One woman looked around our barrack to make sure no Nazis were present. Then she announced, 'It is Rosh Ha-Shonah. I will start the service.' She recited all the prayers by heart. But the longer she prayed, the harder everybody cried. Finally, there was so much crying that the service had to be stopped."

After some rooting about in almanacs, I discovered that in 1944, Rosh Ha-Shonah had fallen on September 18. The September 13 bombing, then, was too early. What had exploded about two weeks after this date? Only one possibility popped up. A magnificent explosion did ring out in Birkenau nineteen days after New Year's. On October 7, 1944, Crematorium IV was blown to bits. Around 1:30 of this day, members of the Sonderkommando, the Jewish workers forced to empty the gas chambers and cremate the bodies, discovered that they themselves were slated for destruction and revolted. They managed to set Crematorium IV afire; the fire touched off other combustibles, and the building exploded. This explosion set the Nazis scrambling. They threw open the door of the room with the stairs and hurried the survivors of C-lager onto the train and out of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

I had a harder time finding the room with the stairs, though. And when I did find it, no one who had been in it was at all pleased with me. I began by combing through survivor accounts, looking for descriptions of gas chambers. One passage seemed like a reasonably good match for my mother's walk passed picket fence and flowers to the room with the stairs. In Lifton's book, The Nazi Doctors (p.65) I read the words of survivor Marianne F. from Czechoslovakia:

> *[There was] this fiendish insight that whoever organized . . . [Auschwitz] had. And the fact that if you do something that is totally unbelievable and . . . you are incapable of believing, you don't believe it. And the things that went on in Auschwitz . . . the gas chambers -- nobody would have believed that. And then the houses that the crematorium had -- you know, brick houses, windows, curtains, white picket fences around the front. And people never thought of anything -- regardless of chimneys smoking. They* could not believe it.

Excited by this discovery, I called my mother up at work.

"Mom! Listen!" and I read her the passage.

"So it did happen, just as I said. A brick house, yes, and the white picket fence! Those bastards! Does she mention the rocker? Read me that passage again."

But no one described stairs. I skimmed histories and narratives, looked at photos, drawings, diagrams, blueprints of the gas chambers: no stairs. It is not at all that I disbelieved my family or mistrusted their impressions. But something so solidly set in the landscape of Birkenau should leave traces somewhere, a phrase in a memoir, an architect's sketch, a bolt set in plaster. I wanted concrete verification so that what I wrote would be not only the family's truth, but a larger

truth, the truth about Birkenau. My family's gas chamber, I finally realized, matched no other. At length, I decided that somewhere in the State Museum at Auschwitz, someone, some expert, would know the answer to my question. All I had to do . . . was go there and ask.

"Don't go to Auschwitz, Gail." My mother was on the telephone. "Don't go. Why don't you go with a group? There must be a study group you can go with."

"But a group won't go where I want to go, and won't stay there long enough. Why don't you come with me to see Auschwitz, Mom."

"I've seen it already. Promise me one thing. Promise me that you won't touch any food that has touched Polish hands."

"That's going to be pretty hard to do in Poland."

Grandmother was worried, too.

"Gail, be careful. The Poles are a very shrewd people."

Only Aunt Olga was at all encouraging.

"I went to Auschwitz, Gail, and I came out safely. You will come out safely, too. I'll be with you, sitting on your shoulder."

I could have cried. I very much needed these kind words of encouragement. I had thought of going to Auschwitz-Birkenau long before, but it took a good long decade to build up sufficient courage to pass through the gates of the death camp that almost swallowed my family whole. The very process of buying plane tickets to Poland made me so grumpy and irritable that I terrified a string of perfectly amiable travel agents. But at long last, in June of 1998, I arrived at the flat, hot, green land in which today's Auschwitz is planted, crossed the parking lot of the Auschwitz

Museum, glanced at the displays of Auschwitz-Birkenau postcards, and walked beneath the gate that reads "Arbeit Macht Frei." The first building on the left beyond this gate now houses an archive but in years-gone-by had housed the "Puff," the Auschwitz brothel. Here on the second floor, I approached a young Polish woman whose job it was to assist visitors in navigating the documents that might point to their lost families. She spoke a solid but unsophisticated English.

"I'm going to tell you a story about my mother," I told her, "and then I'm going to ask you a question." I condensed our family tale into a few straightforward sentences and briefly described the room with the stairs.

"Now, is there someone here who could help me locate that room? Is there someone who knows a lot about the gas chambers?"

"You could talk to Dr. Fanciszek Piper. He is the one most likely to be able to help you." And she directed me to another of the identical red-brick buildings of Auschwitz. I found Dr. Piper at his lunch, which he graciously postponed in order to talk with me. We settled down in his office and I again repeated the family story and asked my question.

"What was the room with the stairs? Was this the gas chamber?"

"There are only two buildings in Birkenau of the kind you describe." Dr. Piper walked over to his wall of books, pulled one from the shelf, and selected a page displaying a schematic map of Birkenau. He pointed at the map.

"These buildings, here and here, had steps of the kind you describe." He was pointing at two T-shaped structures in the sections of Birkenau known as BIa and BIb, in the women's camp. Familiar with the maps of Birkenau by now, I knew these structures were not the gas chambers

and, for a few sharp seconds, was disappointed. 'There goes a really good narrative,' I thought. But I couldn't remain depressed by my family's not having been in danger of a gassing for long.

"What was the purpose of these buildings?" I asked.

"Whenever prisoners were removed from Birkenau to serve as slave labor elsewhere, the normal procedure was to take them first to be disinfected. These buildings were used for disinfection. If you take the bus over to Birkenau, you can see them. I think they're locked now, but you might find a door that's still open. Perhaps you can see what's left of the stairs."

I am so delighted with this information, so giddy, that I forget to ask how steps could possibly facilitate the process of disinfection. My mind jumps instead to my mother's description of her walk to the room with the stairs.

"Was there a building with flowers?"

"Yes, there were flowers everywhere in Auschwitz. Not where the prisoners were, of course. The Germans loved flowers, trees, and birds."

"Just not people."

"Just not people."

I race down the steps and down the walkway, follow the clearly marked Exit signs and slow down in the Auschwitz parking lot, by the little stores that sell books, postcards, bottled water and chocolate; near the Auschwitz cafeteria that sells pizza and mushroom soup. The shuttle only runs on the half-hour, but a string of taxis is waiting. One takes me to Birkenau, about five minutes away, for ten zloty, and drops me off by the Gate of Death, the guard tower through which the train tracks still run. Behind barbed-wire fences, today's Birkenau appears,

sparkling green, sweet-smelling, newly-mown, beneath a baby-blue sky. A team of men in gasmasks sprays insecticide along the walls of the buildings, slowly moving from one to the next. It is hard to watch the men in gasmasks without feeling uneasy, so close to the gas chambers lying in rubble a short walk away. I can smell the insecticide, and I have no gas mask. The men work systematically, without deviating an inch from their task, visitors or no. No guests here will be bitten by vermin.

This is Birkenau, but not Birkenau. It's impossible to imagine it filled with mud and wretched, lice-infested inmates. As I walk toward the room with the stairs, I recall that my mother had never mentioned lice to me, never complained about them. But after reading other survivor accounts, I asked her one day, "Mom, did you have lice in Auschwitz? All the other survivors I've read talk about them, but you never do."

Mother laughed.

"Lice! Of course we had lice! Everyone had them. You couldn't get away from them."

"Why didn't you ever mention them."

"I never really noticed them. If you are really hungry, believe me, you don't care about lice."

I reach the disinfection buildings, two identical brick structures mirroring each other across a barbed-wire fence. I run up to the first and begin to circle, checking doors. All locked. But the windows allow a clear view of many of the rooms. I wade through weeds not yet trimmed to take a closer look. One window shows me a wall of smudged white plaster, covered with recent graffiti -- names in Polish -- and a closed door. Another reveals round structures jutting up from the floor, the shattered remains of vats for washing feet. I see crumbling, broken

spaces, plaster walls bearing the imprint of previous structures -- a row of bricks, scars where other walls had been -- impossible to decipher. In one large room is a pile of timber. Perhaps the stairs? But this room is large and my mother's room was small. I move over to this building's twin. More locks and doors and vistas of rubble. A series of square windows looks into a large chamber, empty, with a steep timber and plaster ceiling supported by stark wooden beams. On one of the crossbeams above are letters painted in faded brown paint, but still clearly legible: "Erhalte dich Ruhig" (Keep Quiet). The room is quiet. This was the undressing room. And then I come to a smaller room. A bit of the door-frame is just visible from where I stand. Above the concrete floor with its drain, disconnected pipes curl here and there from the wall. Before me, against the wall, is another pile of wood, some beams stout as railroad ties, others flatter and bolted together, all stacked in a sloping pile. Some beams are notched to fit together. These are the remains of the steps, the interlocking beams and thick seats where frightened women once perched in a space that they could not comprehend.

I have found the room with the stairs.

At home, my mother, aunt, and grandmother are serenely unimpressed by my discoveries. Mother examines my snapshot of a dusty stack of wood taken, painstakingly, through a window. I have spent hundreds of hours and dollars to take this picture.

"Yes, maybe. Yes, yes, those could be the stairs. They did look like that. But the room I was in had no window."

For my Aunt Olga, too, the room remained, indelibly, the gas chamber. On the phone, she told me again about the room with the stairs.

"They took us to a building a little distance from the train station. There were steps. We were all squeezed in there, even more than were selected for labor from C-lager. There must have been more people at the train station who joined us. People started to pray, cry, scream. People talked. We understood them, because many of them spoke Hungarian. "They're going to gas us," they said. Above me I saw spigots. I didn't know if gas or water would come out. I saw the flames every night and smelled the burning flesh, so I knew about the gas. The Germans had said we would be taken to Germany to work. But I didn't believe them by then."

If you are in Birkenau in 1944 and you've never seen a gas chamber, any room could be one. Any locked door, any change in routine or in the mood of the guards could signal danger. Anything, any seemingly ordinary object or place -- a cart, a taste of honey, an unfamiliar path -- could hold a hidden threat. And here they were, walking on the other side of the train tracks, where they could see smoking chimneys growing nearer, past the truck with its burden of stacked bodies, past shocking beds of flowers -- a distraction? -- and into a broad undressing room. But this was not the undressing room of their first day; this was another. What was its purpose this time? They were promised showers. Would there be showers? They were rushed down a twisting corridor, unlike any in the lagers. The guards were vicious now as they had never been before. They beat the women wildly. Surely that had a meaning. They were forced through a door. Behind them, blows were showering and ahead, a room unlike any other, anywhere -- a room seemingly without windows, filled with steps and pipes and panic. A room with no way out. Naked, they were forced in, forced up the wooden stairs by the pressure of other beaten women pouring in behind them. They were jammed together, crushed. A voice rang out: "There

are pipes in here!" Didn't that have a meaning? The room filled with shrieks and cries.

I no longer believe that my family had a narrow escape from a gas chamber. But they feel, unquestionably, as if they have.

Part V: HASAG Altenburg

When I was young, my mother had a scar on the back of her left index finger. Every once in a while, she would brush against it the wrong way, then clutch her hand, sucking in her breath sharply.

"What's wrong, Mom." She would then show me her finger.

"It's nothing, Gailsy. I cut myself on a screw once, during the war."

That cut took twenty years to heal, a reminder of the factory at Altenburg.

Walking Knobs

I lean against the railing of my deck, watching the light fade from the garden on a hot, Western Pennsylvanian fourth of July. A month ago, my parents had visited, and I had proudly shown my mother all the newly planted trees: a bald cypress, a twiggy black gum, and a red maple sapling now took their place among the hemlocks, pines, river birch, and sugar maples.

"Your Grandfather would never approve of these trees, Gail."

"Why not?"

"He would think it foolish to plant a pine where you could have a cherry or an apple tree growing. At least then you would have something to eat."

"Mom, this land is close to being a swamp. I don't think an apple tree would grow here."

"To think you know so much about soil!"

Now in July, the hillside has changed from mud to hard-baked clay. I examine my potted vegetable garden, safe from rabbits on the deck. The soil is so dry that my cucumber vine has wilted, yet the air is sodden and hints at a rain that never seems to arrive. Ravenous insects and fireworks dot the sky. I fetch a bucket of water, thinking about October, 1944, when my family, enduring Nazis and lice, hoped for Allied bombs to fall at last, like a welcome rain, from the sky. They would have six months to wait. I review the stories I know from this period. The stories of the goldfish, the onion, and the nurse come to mind immediately. A few other tales rise to the surface as well, then I draw a blank. Why are there so few stories? Time for a chat, I decide, and make a series of phone calls to my mother, aunt, and grandmother to milk them for details of their time as slave laborers in Altenburg, Germany.

"Mom, your memory of Auschwitz is always so good."

"Yes! Can you imagine remembering one year fifty years later? But I remember it. I remember it. It's like it's engraved on my mind."

"Do you remember Altenburg too?

"Yes, yes."

"Describe for me the building that you stayed in there."

"It was a large building surrounded by electrified barbed wires. Everything was in that one building, a room for the Jews -- long, like a barrack, the kitchen, the showers. Someplace else in the building must have been the rooms for the Gypsies and the Poles. We were kept separate from them. There were maybe about two hundred of us in that building. The room we stayed in was like a dormitory, filled with bunkbeds, but only two bunks high, not three. Only

two people were assigned to one bunk, not twelve, but Mother, Olga and I chose to sleep together. As usual, we stayed on the upper tier. We had a blanket now for the first time since we left home, and the room was heated. Hot showers and a little bit of soap were available. Best of all, you didn't have to use your rations here to buy a bowl; one was given to you.

"Do you remember the outside of the building?"

"No, not clearly. It wasn't like the barracks in C-lager. Maybe it was a building that they already had that they fixed up for us."

"Was it a stone building, or a brick?"

"No, not stone . . . "

"Mom, I'm wondering why there are so many fewer stories of Altenburg than about Auschwitz."

"You know, I had deteriorated terribly by then. I ceased to be. In Auschwitz, I still existed for a while. I reminded myself to remember who I was, to remember my best friend's name. But by Altenburg, I was so starved out that I ceased to register things. We were hungry all the time, even though the food was somewhat better there than at Auschwitz. It was recognizable, a kind of thin, oaten gook. I remember thinking, 'After liberation, I want as much of this gook as I can eat, only thicker.'

"You couldn't imagine anything better than that to eat?"

"No! That seemed like the best meal in the world to me, a thick oat gook. The cook, though, was terrifying. She was a German woman famous for beating people, a murderer. They told us that she had killed her own mother. We saw this woman only once, when we went to the kitchen with some coupons they had given us, a kind of camp money, for having done a good job

working. The money said "Altenburg Kommando, Buchenwald" on it. In fact, that's how we found out where we were. We were hoping for a little extra food and decided to see what we could buy with this money. In the canteen they had beer and salad. We stood in line for a very long time, but by the time we got to the front, they had run out of the salad. Only beer was left. "Come, children," Mother said, "Beer still has some nutrition in it. We will drink beer." And that was my very first taste of beer. I hated it; it tasted so bitter."

Eugene Kogan's book, The Theory and Practice of Hell, reports that the Buchenwald canteen, which had few supplies, most usually sold light beer and "Viking salad," a "vari-colored synthetic of doubtful description, apparently based on potatoes and ground fish bones" (119). This may be the salad that my family missed.

"Unlike the cook, our kapo, was very kind, a Jewish woman. When she ladled out the soup, Mother would say to her, 'Can't you push the ladle in deeper? I have kids to feed.' Mother was hoping there would be a turnip or a potato floating down there. But the kapo would say, 'I am pushing it in, but there's nothing in this soup, nothing.' This woman looked very concerned later, when they took me to the infirmary.

"Once in Altenburg I saw people who were really, really starved. A group of men arrived in there one day. It was a few days before liberation, and perhaps they were on one of those long marches. We didn't know then about death marches. They were being moved from one place to another and were put temporarily in the yard behind the barracks, inside the barbed wire

enclosure. We could see them from our window, but we were not allowed to go near. Nobody fed them. They were given no water. They sat down in the yard and started to eat the grass. By morning, they were gone. I was horrified. I knew hunger; I was still hungry, but I had never been so hungry that I tried to eat grass. For those people to eat grass, they must have been much, much hungrier than I, and I was very thin by that time."

"How much did you weigh?"

"I don't know exactly how much I weighed. Did you ever see a skeleton in the grave with big knuckle bones as knees? -- That was me. When I look at pictures of the dead bodies at Auschwitz, I recognize my legs. When the American soldiers liberated us, we were so thin that a soldier bent out from the top of his tank to vomit. I was skinnier than most survivors. I wasn't like a healthy dead body. My legs were walking knobs: big knees, no flesh in between, big, big holes around the eyes, and blue eyes looking out of the holes. Even months later, when we had already been eating again for months, everything was free for us in Paris. You can't revive a skeleton so fast. They knew we had been in the camps just by looking. Food was just handed over -- no money -- people just gave. Kitchens were set up in every city for survivors. We looked like the resurrection of the dead.

For a long time after liberation, it was written on our faces that we are survivors. We were empty -- we could not see, we could not smile, we could not feel. We were empty. We could not feel joy. We wondered, Was he a Nazi? Was his father a Nazi? Could he be trusted? Everybody we looked at was suspect. When you come back from the dead, you are not a child anymore."

Civilians

"Did any of the German civilians ever see you?"

"On the way to Altenburg, our train stopped at a few places and civilians, looking in through the windows, saw the SS guarding their group of living skeletons. 'Who are these people,' the civilians wanted to know, and the SS guards told them, 'These are poor working girls on their way to work.'

"How did the people react?"

"They sucked in their breath. I think they were shocked."

"How about on your walk to and from work. Did civilians see you then?"

"We had to get up to go to work about four thirty AM. They counted us perhaps at five o'clock, gave us some bitter coffee, and then we had to be at our work by six. It was dark then. It was light when we walked back to the barracks at six o'clock in the evening, but we weren't in an area that had people in it. We were on the outskirts of town, so I never really saw Altenburg, just factory buildings and heaps of iron and scraps. Only once or twice did we go into town, after our twelve hour shift, when they assigned us extra work to do. Once we went into an extremely poor neighborhood with dilapidated buildings. The Nazis gave us shovels and told us to clear the mud from the streets. Civilians might have seen us then.

"In the factory, you know, we worked right along side of civilians, every day. There were three German girls that we worked with. Two were young, maybe nineteen. The other was the supervisor, maybe twenty-seven years old. Anna I think was her name.

"What kind of work did you do?"

"They never told us anything about it. We were given a machine with a handle to crank, like a meat grinder. In the top of the machine, we were supposed to place a kind of large screw with a space for something else to fit inside. Then we had to turn the handle and look at the point of the screw. If it held steady, it was a good one, and we put it back into a box like a series of squares or compartments. If the tip wobbled when you looked at it, it was no good and you were supposed to throw it out. We had a whole wooden block, like a grid, that we were supposed to fill with perfect screws. I think those screws must have been for some kind of munitions."

"After we had been there for a while, I noticed that our supervisors, the two young women, were more interested in chatting about their boyfriends than in paying close attention to what they were doing. They were sloppy about examining our work. One of them always checked the screws in the same way, one in the upper lefthand corner, one in the lower right. Since she never varied, I tried, quickly, to sabotage as many screws in the middle of the block as I could. If they were bombs, I wasn't going to help them to explode. I was terrified, though, that one day I would be caught. But I never was. But when the older woman, Anna, was inspecting, I was too afraid to cheat."

"Did you have a sense of a difference in attitude between the civilians you worked with and the SS? Did the civilians behave differently toward you?"

"Abso*lu*tely no! *No* difference. Mother spent six months begging for a single onion. And that took a lot of nerve. They looked at us with such contempt! If you had some monster, a monstrous man-eating crab that you captured, and it escaped, how would you look at it? That's how they looked at us. You know, they never asked us a single thing about ourselves, not 'Who are you?' or 'Where did you come from?' No 'hello,' no human communication of any kind.

Perhaps they were indoctrinated. We were afraid of them. They behaved just like Nazis --with one exception. Remember the story about the goldfish? Except for that one man, they looked at us as if we were worms, not even worms. Some people try not to kill worms. Hate was written in their faces. They never, ever said a word to us: 'Are you sisters? Is this your mother?' To them, we were the filth of the earth."

The Gold Fish

When I speak to the eighth graders in my home town about my family's experiences during the Holocaust, the students often ask me if any Germans were kind to my relatives while they were in the camps. The answer is, yes. There was one kind civilian. But only one.

"Every morning," Mom tells me, "they gave us some coffee, then marched us out of the compound, so for a little while every day, there were no wire fences around us. We walked for about thirty or forty-five minutes to our work place with guards at the front, guards at the back, guards on this side, and guards on that. In our work compound, many of the buildings were underground. The roofs were so low that you could look down on them as you walked by. The Nazis had painted a big red cross on the roof, so if the Allies flew over, it wouldn't be bombed. Our workplace, though was above the ground. We worked for twelve hours a day without a break. Then after work, sometimes they assigned more work to us. One day, they gave us an unbelievable task. It was bitterly cold out, so cold that your breath would freeze into icicles on your hair and on your face. They took us outside to a huge pile of scrap metal, as high as a two

story building. We were told to move it from one side of the yard to another. We had no winter clothing, just a thin cotton garment, and absolutely no gloves. Your hands froze to the metal when you touched it. We had to do this for three or four hours. The next day after work, we were given the same assignment, but this time we had to push the same pile of metal back to where it had stood the day before. The weather was still sub-zero. I did not think that I would last. Just then, a German man came up to us, a civilian, and beckoned that we should follow him. We were afraid to leave Mother. We were afraid because you never knew what being summoned meant, but you had to go. We walked across the yard and down the stairs into another building. The halls were dark, and as he turned on the lights, I could see machines, men standing at machines, at work in another room. Then the man turned on another light. In the center of a warm, comfortable room stood a large fishbowl. 'Stay here,' he said, 'and watch the fish.' And that's what we did for the rest of the time. I sat and watched the goldfish swimming round and round! When the time was up, he came to get us, and we ran out to rejoin the others."

"Weren't you bored, sitting for hours watching fish?"

"Bored? No! I was warm!"

"What happened to Grandmother while you were warm?"

"She had to keep pushing the cold metal with her bare hands. The Nazis thought, if you work hard for twelve hours a day and then you work harder out in the cold, without a coat, without a hat, it wears you down. The Nazis hoped that maybe this way we would all die a little faster."

Cures for Stubborn Children

Alice Miller, a psychologist who has studied the connections between cruelty and childrearing practices in Germany, cites an example, drawn from a German pedagogical text of 1796, of how to uproot willfulness in children. Konrad is a young boy who has snatched a doll from his sister and refuses to return it. For this stubbornness, his father beats him, but later regrets striking the child and seeks comfort from his pastor, who gives him this advice:

> *Now while the lashes are still fresh in your Konrad's mind, I advise you to take advantage of it. When you come home, see that you order him about a good deal. Have him fetch you your boots, your shoes, your pipe, and take them away again; have him carry stones in the yard from one place to another. He will do it all and become accustomed to obeying. (qtd. Miller 58).*

The same childrearing text gives instructions on teaching children control over their own bodies:

> *Put their bodies to the test insofar as their health permits: let them go hungry and thirsty, bear heat and cold, perform difficult labors, but see that this occurs with their acquiesence (qtd. Miller 26).*

Before women in Altenburg pushed scrap metal, children in Germany moved stones. Can cruelty be so hard to identify? Do tyrants think themselves just fathers? Perhaps Nazi guards said to themselves, "We bore the cold; we performed difficult labors. Nothing unusual is happening here."

What factory did you work for?

Exactly which company had employed my family as slave labor remained a mystery to us for many years. The answer finally emerged, forty-five years after the war, through a chance encounter.

"The Nazis didn't tell us what factory we belonged to," Mom told me, "I know that we were a sub-camp of Buchenwald, because of that money I had received that said, 'Altenburg Kommando, Buchenwald' on it. I've kept some of those bills. So I know that we belonged to Buchenwald. At one point, I found a spoon that said I.G. Farben on it. So I thought that maybe that was the factory we worked for."

"I don't think you belonged to I. G. Farben," I told my mother. By then I had done a little research. "They produced chemicals. It doesn't sound as if you were producing chemicals."

Years later, Aunt Olga attended a special ceremony held in Philadelphia to honor liberators.

"It was a shock to see the liberators there on the stage. Here they were, a bunch of little old men, sitting on stage with their oxygen tanks. When we saw them last, they were young men, strong, riding tanks. At that meeting I met a survivor who had been everyplace that we were. I stood up to make a comment, and whatever I said, she said, "Me, too!" She was from Hungary; she had been in C-lager; she was in Altenburg, and she was liberated in Waldenburg, just as we were. She took good notes after the Holocaust, and from her I learned that the company we worked for was called HASAG Altenburg."

> *The Buchenwald Report, written immediately after the war but first published in English in 1995, lists HASAG as having six sites, including one in Altenburg, all devoted to the production of munitions and handgrenades. All were sub-camps of Buchenwald, and all employed slave labor. (306)*

People Watched Us

I give Olga a call in July, and after a few tries, I catch her at home.

"Aunt Olga, I'm working on the Altenburg section."

"Are you still writing? What would you like to know, dear?"

"While you were there, were there any opportunities for civilians to see you?"

"Sure they saw us. Some of our guards were civilians, former German criminals who had been in for murder. One guard, a short little individual, would brag about how many he had

killed. All our supervisors were German civilians. We were all Hungarian Jewish women. As soon as we arrived in the factory, a German worker asked us, "Who speaks German here?" They needed someone to translate the instructions for the Hungarian workers. Your Mother and I both knew German. We had studied it in school, and we could both understand Yiddish, too. The languages are very similar. So we were all ready to volunteer to translate, but Mother said to us, "We don't know any languages. We speak only Hungarian."

"They drove us really, really hard. I think we were checking grenades, before they were filled with gunpowder. Our hands were filled with slivers of cut metal. If the screws were not perfect, we were told to discard them. We had a quota. Your Mom and Grandmom had to help me reach the quota, because I was so sick. And that was on top of their own work. Every day we had to check so and so many boxes filled with screws. But once you threw out a screw, you had to fill the box with another perfect one. The pace was so fast that it was humanly impossible to discard the imperfect screws and still keep the box filled. So I put in lots of imperfect screws. I never really thought about sabotage. Your Mom did, but I was just too tired to check all the screws and keep up. The Germans kept coming in to us, yelling that the bombs were not exploding, but they never caught us. There was no way to track down who did what work.

"German civilians saw us at other times, too. In Altenburg, they gave us some brooms and we swept the streets. We had to work for twelve hours a day, and then they took us for sweeping. People watched us. And on the death march, people watched. I had to walk in wooden clogs. My feet were bleeding. In a neighborhood just outside of Waldenburg, the Germans came out to give food and water to the German soldiers. They gave nothing to us. And

after liberation, the same people said that they never saw us. Oh yes, they saw us, but nobody helped us."

The Onion

Once, my family was given help, but in a manner I had always found to be self-serving and offensive. This is the story of the onion.

"A year without a vegetable is extremely difficult," Mom tells me. "Your gums ache for something crunchy, and your whole body cries out. Mother started to beg Anna, the German woman who supervised us, for an onion. Mother decided on an onion, because in every country they are always very cheap and would be no burden to anyone. And besides, an onion is a vegetable. Every day, Mother begged, "Don't you have an onion? Won't you bring us an onion?" But the woman never brought us the onion. Olga and I were two skeletons, sixteen and seventeen years old, and she didn't have the heart to bring us food.

"Finally, came a day when you could already hear the guns of the Americans in the distance. At work, the German girls were afraid, and we could hear them discussing the war. They hoped the Americans would be the first ones there, not the Russians, because the Russian soldiers, they said, raped everybody. 'Ah, ha! I thought, so now you're afraid, too.' Anna came to work that day with a single onion in one hand and a letter in the other. She wanted Mother to

sign the letter before she handed over the onion. In it, Anna had written that she had been kind to us, treated the Jews well during the war, and that she had given us an onion."

"Grandmom didn't sign, did she?"

"Of course she did. We wanted that onion."

"I never would have signed."

"You would have."

When I was a high school student, about fifteen years old, I was shocked to discover in Dostoevski's novel, The Brothers Karamazov, what appeared to be the ending to my mother's story of the onion. In a chapter entitled, "The Onion," Dostoevski speaks of a fallen woman named Grushenka who believes she still possesses a modicum of goodness. She observes, "Though I am bad, I did give away an onion." She explains this comment by telling a Russian folktale:

> *Once upon a time, there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire. So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell to God; 'she once pulled up an onion in her garden,' he said, 'and gave it to a beggar woman.' And God answered: 'You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is.' The*

> *angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her; 'Come,' he said, 'catch hold and I'll pull you out.' and he began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her right out when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. 'I'm to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours.' As soon as she said that, the onion broke. And the woman fell into the lake and she is burning there to this day. So the angel wept and went away. (240-41)*

This story amazed me. Stunned, I looked around my room, then back down at the page. There was no one there with whom I could share this mysterious moment. Dostoevski knew about the onion! He knew my family's story, although he had lived years before World War II. Of course, he couldn't have known about the particular German woman who had given my grandmother the onion, yet here, I felt, was the story of that woman's fate. Anna's giving the onion was a good deed, truly. Perhaps it even involved some risk. But her onion broke because she gave it only to protect herself. For me, Dostoevski restored justice to the world. Anna fell into a lake of fire, while an angel wept and went away.

The Gypsy Dancer

"You were wondering why I have so few tales about Altenburg. I'll tell you another reason," Mom says to me during our phone call. "My fear was gone. Altenburg had no selections, and my work was not hard. Maybe because we were so worn out, they gave us a job that was seated. The huskier girls had jobs standing up, near the ovens. We were lucky we did not have the ovens. We worked with big wooden blocks that were soaked in water and heavy, terribly heavy, with holes for metal screws. When ten of these boxes were filled, the huskier girls had to put them into the ovens. All day long to lift these boxes, I would have collapsed. I did lift them, but only one at a time, to pass them on, and in between I worked on checking the screws. But the girls by the ovens had to lift all our boxes, all day, maybe five hundred boxes. Sometimes, I saw them collapse. Then they were taken away and we never saw them again.

My job was not bad, though. Maybe they gave me such light work because the Germans were running out of laborers by then, and they could see I wouldn't last long doing anything heavy. My fear ended, too, because Altenburg had no crematorium and no rumors that they were killing us. I did worry every day about my brothers, of course. And I still feared the SS. We did have one close call with an SS man.

"In Altenburg, the Jews were kept separate from the Poles and the Gypsies. They were in another part of the camp and we never saw them, except when we took showers. The Polish women liked to use the showers first. They would beat the Jewish women with their big fists so that they could be first in line. So we stayed away from the showers until we thought the Polish

women had finished. We never went early. The Jews and the Gypsies could go at the same time without a problem. One day during our shower, two gypsies began to perform. One clapped her hands and sang while a beautiful young Gypsy woman began to dance. We were all naked in the showers, and the dancer, too was nude. A crowd of bathers gathered and the other Gypsies joined in, singing and clapping. As the woman danced, a Nazi guard walked in on us, but the dancer had her back to the door and did not notice. One by one, the members of the audience stopped clapping, then the singer fell silent. Finally the dancer turned around, saw the Nazi, and stopped. We all held our breath, waiting to see what would happen, but the Nazi said nothing. He just turned and walked away."

"What did you think the Nazi might do?"

"The Nazi was a horror to us. He had our life in his hands. At a whim, he could stab you with his sword or take you from those you loved. Like the Angel of Death, he points at you, and you cannot get away. If your eyes meet, you are doomed. The sight of them was indescribable. You could live near a guillotine all day long and still feel safe, but the Nazi was like the man who operates the guillotine. We hoped, but when we saw the Nazi, hope was wiped away. The distance between death and me was erased."

The Nurse

"One other fear we had at Altenburg, as well. There were rumors that if you were sick you would be taken to Buchenwald. At first you could rationalize: 'I'm healthy. I can work. That

won't be me.' After a while, though, the rationalizations broke down, and there was nothing to hold on to, nothing to reassure you that you're going to live.

"A day came when I found the noise of the factory simply unbearable. My head throbbed, and I could hardly keep it up. Even sitting up was difficult. A Nazi guard pointed at me, and then pointed out. They took me to an infirmary, a small room in another building with three beds in it. The nurse in charge was a Jewish woman, a fellow prisoner. She looked at me, and then said, "Now, I'm going to take your temperature, and when I come back, your temperature is going to be normal. Do you understand me?" I nodded my head "yes." "Good," she said, and placed a thermometer under my tongue. Then she went out of the room. While she was away, I quickly shook the thermometer down until it read "normal." Then the nurse came back and read the thermometer. "Good!" she said. "You have no fever." She took my temperature several times that day, each time reminding me, "Remember, you have no fever." They kept me in the infirmary to rest for one day, then they gave me a single aspirin and sent me back to my job in the factory. I had typhus."

"How do you know you had typhus?"

"After liberation, the American doctor examined me and gave me medication. He told me I had typhus."

If the Nazis in charge had discovered that my mother was very ill, she would have been sent back to the main camp, Buchenwald. Karl Koch, the commandant of the camp was known to have boasted, "In my camp, there are no sick, only the healthy and the dead." (Buchenwald Report 215)

A Tree with Birds

"Do you want to know what made me happy in Altenburg? One thing made me very happy. From my window, I could see a tree, green, with birds in it."

"And what was most difficult for you in Altenburg?"

"Most difficult? . . . In Auschwitz, it was the fear of separation. We didn't have that fear anymore in Altenburg. The most difficult thing was . . . not having our freedom. I thought, 'Spring is here and I cannot walk into the garden or see my flowers coming up.' I could not touch a fruit tree. In Auschwitz, nothing was green. Even birds avoided it. But outside our compound in Altenburg, trees, flowers, everything was coming to life, blooming. I could hear the birds singing, and I felt that if I couldn't get out of here I'll burst. So I told Mother one day, 'I can't stand being here anymore. I'm going to escape,' and I began to plan. I decided to save up bread and use it to purchase a much bigger top. Then, I would organize a needle and thread and sew the back together so that the large black square of material in the back would be hidden, and no one could tell so easily that I was a prisoner. We always marched out to work while it was still dark. I could just step aside, out of the line, and make my way to the forest where I could survive on berries and mushrooms. The only problem was that I didn't know where the forest was."

Aunt Olga remembers her sister's plan to escape.

"It is a most painful, painful thing when you see the sun coming out and birds flying, and you're behind bars. Your mother decided to escape. Some people tried, but they brought them back and killed them. Even if we escaped, how could we blend in? We were so thin, in raggedy clothes. Our hair had grown since it was cut in Auschwitz, but it still wasn't a normal haircut. You couldn't escape looking like this, but Lenka decided she was going, and that was that. Mother and I went out of our minds! You couldn't get out of Altenburg, you couldn't! But your mother said, 'I'm going. You can come with me, or you can stay here.' So we let her make her plans."

"We didn't know how the war was going, but one day, the Allies bombed Altenburg. The Nazis locked all the slave workers into the factory while they ran and hid. We were hoping very much that the bombs would hit us. Not that we wanted to die. We really didn't care anymore, but we wanted so for the Nazis to be punished."

"As I was making my escape plans," Mom said, "the Americans were already getting close. They dropped leaflets from planes all around the town. We were being marched between the factory and the barracks. The Nazis began screaming and hollering and running, like rats, in every direction. 'Don't touch it! Don't touch it!' They had their guns pointed at us. They always had their guns pointed at us. We were not allowed to go near the leaflets, and they became a source of rumors among the prisoners. Maybe they said, 'We know you're there,' or 'We're coming soon.' Whatever they said, they had a profound effect on Nazi morale. The Nazis were very nervous. The leaflets were the first sign that we had that we may survive. Our state of physical existence was so poor. We did not know if we would be alive in three days or a week.

There was no future for us. But the leaflets brought the war so close that we knew it was really happening. We didn't know that the Nazis had lost in Russia, or that America had joined the war. But now we saw a plane overhead and -- bzzzzz -- it was flying very low and came out so fast over us. And then they started to drop leaflets. The Nazis were disorganized, running around, terrified. We had hope. We never dreamed, though, that as close as we were to liberation that they still wanted to kill us."

"Then, the day before we left Altenburg, the city was bombed. In camp, sirens sounded to warn people to take shelter. Our barrack was hit and the ceiling collapsed. I can't describe such joy to you. I was *so* happy when the bombs were falling. I didn't care if I die, so long as the Nazis died with us. I didn't want to be a slave, and I didn't want the Nazis to get away with it. I wanted to sing and dance, but I had to look calm. We had a chance to survive, now. The next day, they marched us out of Altenburg."

Part VI: Liberation and After

"Before liberation, did you dream about it?"

I am home on a visit to my family in early August, 1999. I sit at the dining room table with my mother before an enormous plate full of home-baked chocolate-chip oatmeal cookies. Each cookie is huge and crunchy. I want to know from my mother not just what happened, but what she thought, felt, and dreamed about what happened.

"How did you imagine liberation?"

"I didn't imagine it. I was just living day by day. I had typhus and fever, no medication, and I worked twelve hours a day. If you do that, what condition are you in? Just a body that won't go away. I didn't think in terms of dying. Young people don't think about dying. I thought in terms of freedom. My head, my ears were buzzing. I couldn't stand the factory noise any more, and I thought, 'I've got to get out!' I didn't know it was typhus. That was diagnosed after the war.

When I ask Aunt Olga the same question later that week, her response is nearly identical. On the plate set before me on her table are sliced cantaloupe, crackers, and cheese.

"What were your thoughts about liberation?"

"No thoughts. I just hoped minute by minute that we would survive. I thought, 'How long can this go on? Why isn't this ended?' We had been in the camps for a year; our emotional functioning was different: we didn't dream."

"And after liberation, how did you feel?"

"Angry. Angry with the civilians who pretended that they had never seen us."

Deathmarch

"After we left Altenburg," Mom recalls, "they marched us day and night, about two days. They tried to rush us, schnell, schnell, to get to the other side of a bridge. As we marched, we came upon some boys, six or seven years old, who had come out to admire the Nazis' guns and uniforms and jazz. They were circling around the Nazis with a "Heil-Hitler" kind of gesture, very, very jabbery and happy and giggly little boys. Then all of a sudden, like rats, the Heil-Hitler boys started to scatter and run. These little rat-like creatures began to run like hell, and a few seconds later, the city was bombed and the bridge was bombed. We ran to see the bridge blowing up, and as the dust settled, we discovered huge white turnips rolling from a bombed out building. In Czechoslovakia, only cattle ate turnips, but we were overjoyed to have a crunchy vegetable, and we filled our pockets full with them. As we marched, we ate them.

"We knew already we were getting free," Grandmother explains. "They marched us out, but Olga could not anymore walk. Her clogs hurt her. The feet were bleeding. She said, 'Mother, you go, save yourself.' We knew already we were getting free. We heard the fights, we heard the fights! The American army was coming. We heard the grenades! We were in the war!"

"I couldn't walk anymore," Olga tells me. "We were on the other side of a bridge that had been blown up. They shot you if you couldn't go on. But I just couldn't go on. We knew liberation was close, and I said I could not go. My feet were bleeding in every direction. Grandmother and your Mom said, 'If you're not coming, we'll stay with you.' They would not go. They held me up and dragged me the rest of the way. We walked about three days, without food, without rest, without water."

Destination

The Buchenwald Report contains a section on the deathmarch from Altenburg, submitted by a survivor, Walter Strasz:

> *On April 12, 1945, the evacuation of the camp was begun. First the women marched out without food and for the most part in wooden shoes without stockings. Following them came the men; however, ten prisoners remained behind, of which I was one. We were supposedly going to catch up with the others and bring them food. That was only a pretext, for besides some bread for the prisoners, our truck carried mostly luggage and large quantities of hoarded food supplies belonging to the SS. . . . I . . . jumped from the truck and tried to escape. We had found out that our journey was to end at the Dresden Gestapo. (193)*

"We kept marching." Mom sits up very straight. "A German woman approached us, to bring us coffee, but the Nazis saw her and beat her back. Halfway along our journey, we came to a medieval town around nightfall, and here I found a lifesaver on the ground. I'll never forget it! I bit it into three pieces and shared it with Mother and Olga.

Finally, we marched passed many bombed buildings and cars to the town of Waldenburg, a beautiful old city with its main square built on the top of a hill. A little below the hill was a wooded area, a forest or a park; we couldn't tell how large it was. The Nazis marched us into this forest, and then a strange thing happened. Some Nazis approached us and started speaking Hungarian, fluent, perfect Hungarian. "Now remember," they said, "We never touched anyone. We never hurt anyone."

Looking down from the hillside, we could see tanks and a battle in progress. On every side of us, Nazi guards were posted. Mother said, "Let's find a dry spot, children." We gathered leaves to make ourselves a bed, and slept beneath a tree, curled together for warmth. The next morning, we woke up in the forest. Birds were singing. We looked around, and all of a sudden -- no Nazis! They disappeared! They were nowhere in sight. We could hardly believe it that our guards were gone! In the forest with us, we discovered some Jewish men, prisoners like us who had been marched there, too. One man volunteered to climb a tree to see how things stood. He called down, "We are surrounded; there are guards in uniform all around us -- but they're not in Nazi uniforms. I don't know who they are, but it's not the Nazis." One of us had a white shirt to use as a flag, and, waving our white flag, we came out of the forest. Beyond the city, we could hear explosions and tanks shaking and rattling the hills. And *there* were the American soldiers, white soldiers and black soldiers. This was the first time we had seen anyone with dark skin. And

this was the first time the soldiers had seen concentration camp survivors. They looked at the walking skeletons. Some cried. Some turned their backs and vomited into the bushes. All of them rushed to give us food: chocolate bars, chewing gum, candy, cans, whatever they had.

That morning, a single bugle played "Taps." That's my liberation song! Hearing music again after the war was such a shock. It filled me with enormous joy, but an enormous sadness, too. I cried. Right after the war, I cried only twice, when I heard "Taps," and later, when I first heard a baby cry. We couldn't cry after the war. The shock was so great, the loss was so great. All we could do was rejoice when we heard that a cousin was still alive, a classmate was still alive, but we could not cry for the dead. It was just too much. It's as if you hear that everyone you know is dead, and then the next day you hear that Jon and Ben are alive, little Shira was found in hiding. How would you feel? I felt immense joy for the living, but I could not cry for my brothers, for years."

Grandmother considers liberation:

"We came to a wooden place, scared and afraid, and we lay down there because we were afraid that they would kill us, on one side the Germans, on the other the Americans. The whole night we heard booms and booms and crying in the street. Then the Americans were there and tried to give us to eat. But the children were eating so much, I was afraid they would drop dead there. Hungry. They were just very hungry. But I would not let them eat. "Mother," they said to me, "what kind of a mother are you that you don't let us eat?" I took it away. When they reached to eat more, I took it away and threw it out. I knew when somebody is very weak and he

eats too much, he can drop dead. I used to read lots of books when I was young, and I knew. Now I don't know anything here. I am not a reader here. I used to know a lot and I used to know that when you are very down and you eat too much, that will kill you. And I would not let Lenka and Olga eat.

"Right away, I began trying to send messages to my husband in the States. There were great, big tanks on the road, and I hollered up, 'Is anyone here from Philadelphia?' And I found a soldier from Philadelphia who spoke Jewish. Berju was his name. Would you believe it, he knew my daughter. He promised me that he would send a note to my husband to tell him that we are alive."

Gunter Berju kept his promise. He sent the news to his uncle in Philadelphia, who sent a postcard to my Grandfather. All the years of his life, Grandfather kept the postcard. When it broke in half, he taped it back together. Today, the writing in blue ink is still unfaded:

May 1, 1945

Dear Mr. Berkovitz:

From my nephew Gunter Berju, who is fighting in the 4th Armored Division, I got the following message: " . . I met an Hungarian woman and her 2 daughters. -- She told me that her husband, Adolf Berkovitz and 2 other daughters live in Phila. She did not hear from her 2 sons for a long time. . . . Tell Mr. B. not more to

worry about his wife. I did all I could for her and the other Jewish people -- about 800.

I am glad to let you know about it. My nephew always trys to help over there our people -- so I am sure everything he writes is true. -- If you like to call me -- I am home after 5.30 PM. -- Sincerely, Walter H. Berju

Milk

Grandmother continues:

"One American -- he lives here now not far in Philadelphia -- was a chaplain, and he asked us what he could give. He talked Jewish. He gave us a piece of soap. I asked for soap to wash down the dirt; we were so dirty and so full of lice."

"A rabbi came up to us." Mom's whole body radiates disapproval. "He was offering Bibles. 'We don't need Bibles,' I screamed at him, 'We need *food*!' The Americans did give us whatever they could, but they were busy fighting the war. And so all the survivors began to spread out, searching for something to eat. We were so hungry that we wanted to cover the whole world and eat up everything in sight. The bombing was still going on. Everybody was indoors, except the hungry people. We stopped a truck delivering milk. The driver was frightened and ran away, so we survivors could help ourselves to the milk. We took the canisters

full of milk with us. As we were filling the canisters, a young woman, not from our group, came up to us wanting milk, too. She came without a dish. She told us that both her parents had died in Theresienstadt. We gave her some milk, and when she left, I followed her to take back our bowl. We don't trust anyone without a bowl. In Auschwitz, you learned to hang on to your container. I found her living with a German family, and she was giving milk to the German children. I began to scream, "Don't you ever come near us again to give milk to the Germans!"

Jam

"A group of us traveled together, and soon we reached what must have been the outskirts of Waldenburg. There someone found a house with shelves loaded with jars and jars of jam. A survivor went in and threw the jars of jam through the window to the rest of us, waiting outside. 'Catch this,' he shouted, 'Catch this!' We opened our jars and began to eat, but just then, a little old German woman came around a corner and began to yell at us. 'A disgrace! A disgrace! You people are disgusting. The German people would never steal!' The jars of jam all went flying for her head. She left, and we finished our meal in peace."

Beans

"Mother, Olga and I kept searching for food. In a yard we found some kind of a metal pot. Then we located some beans growing and some kind of grain as well. Mother built a fire

outside of a barn and began to cook. A German woman who lived in a house nearby came out shouting, "What are you doing here? You'll burn the place down!' But when she saw what we were trying to do, she offered to take the beans inside and cook them for us. She told us to come back in a couple of hours. When we did, she gave us the pot of beans and grain, nicely cooked. She had even added some meat to it and some oil or fat. Mother was worried that we would eat too much, and she made the stew last for several days."

Bread

"After a few days of foraging on our own, the Americans were able to take care of us for a while, even though the city was not yet entirely secured. They took over a building so recently occupied by the Nazis that the attic was still jam-packed with bombs. That's where they put us. They gave us medical care and put us in beds with clean white sheets. They didn't have time to set up a kitchen for us, but they did give us whatever they had on them: spam, chocolate, bread, even a can of bacon. I took bread with me everywhere. I ate it mealtimes, I took it to bed with me, I carried it in my pockets, I ate it in the middle of the night whenever I woke up, I slept with it under my pillow. During this period, I was not hungry.

"The day after the Americans installed us into this building, the Germans came back and tried to blow it up. The explosion went off harmlessly in the yard while we were out looking for more food, but the Americans now understood that they would have to post guards around us to protect us. We stayed in Waldenburg about two or three days. I remember because I remember

what I ate: milk, beans, and jam. By now, Mother just wanted to go home to search for my brothers. We felt that that's the place where we could meet. We had already learned that there were very, very few survivors.

"How did you learn that there were few survivors?" I ask my mother.

"We heard it first at the milk truck. People were talking. They were no longer afraid, and they were beginning to talk. They said all our babies had been killed."

Heading Home

"Since we wanted to go home, the Americans made provisions for us. They took us by bus to a train station near the Czech border, where the Russian zone began. Here we could wait for a Russian train. The Russians were very friendly when the Americans took us to them. They said, 'Da, da, tovarish,'-- Friends, Friends -- but we soon discovered that we were stranded on the train tracks. The station platform was dark. Soldiers were everywhere. No train came. Finally, Mother approached an officer who seemed to be in charge at the station and asked him what she could do about lodgings. 'Look lady,' he said, 'I could tell you to stay in this building, or stay in that building, but it would not help you any. If the Russian soldiers want to break down the doors, there is nothing you can do to stop them. This is Germany, and the Russians are going to rape any girl they find. They don't know the difference.' 'My God! What am I going to do with my two girls!' The man told her to get on the first train that slows down in the station. The trains would not stop, but they would slow down just enough that you could jump aboard. We waited

for the next train, and finally one came that went slowly through the station. We tried jumping on the train. The Russian soldiers put their hands out, and they helped me, and they helped Olga, but when Mother tried, they pushed her down. 'Babushka,' they said, 'we don't want you.' Olga and I managed to jump off again.

"Eventually, all three of us did get a train. Traveling was not easy. The tracks had been bombed everywhere and we had to switch trains frequently. Some trains went in the opposite direction of where we wanted to go. Sometimes we left the train to hunt for food. Hungry people would descend upon scallions, and the Germans shouted, 'Thieves! Thieves!' Once some Russians came onto the train searching for some women to translate. 'Who here speaks Russian?' they asked. I assumed that they wanted to find translators to help them run concentration camps for the Germans, and I wanted to help run them. I knew exactly how, so I jumped up and said, 'I speak Russian.' Just as quickly, Mother jumped on me and pushed me down. She knew that the Russians wanted more than just translation."

Babushka Saves the Girls

Grandmother's memory of the Russians looking for translators remains vivid. As we talk, she cleans two pounds of greenbeans, soon to become part of her famous Hungarian greenbean soup, made with milk and vinegar -- my favorite.

"Gail, you did not buy me good string beans. Look how poor the quality."

"Grandmom, these are the only string beans the store had."

"I am really very sorry. These are no good. I will not eat the soup."

"*I'll* eat it. I'll like it. Now. Tell me about traveling after liberation."

"We wanted to go home. We were on a truck with three guys, and one of them was very much after Lenka. I said, 'No,' and he put us out of the truck with our bundles. We took a train. When the train stopped, the Russians came, looking for translators. I pushed Olga and Lenka under the blanket and called out, "I am here! Do you want me to go with you?" My hair was short and growing up to the sky. I looked like hell. 'No, babushka. We don't want you.' I didn't have the strength to save the girls. But I saved them!"

Lenka on the Road

"How did it feel to be traveling?" I ask my mother.

"I loved it! It gets under your skin! When we stopped in Philadelphia and couldn't go anywhere, it felt funny. 'You mean we can't go someplace new tomorrow?' As we traveled, I was hoping to find my brothers, and it was like an adventure, a Huckleberry Finn kind of adventure. How do I survive on nothing? What would be next? I also searched for my friends Lilly and Goldy Shon, sisters from a rich family, and for Nunci, who used to live across the street from me, and for another Lilly from Patak, the daughter of a ragman. I liked her very, very much. But only Nunci survived."

Olga's Travelogue

"Gail, why are you interviewing Olga?" my Grandmother asks me. "She was sick the whole time. How can she remember anything?"

It's true that Aunt Olga was extremely ill while she was in the camps and after, but she was no turnip being carted from place to place. If you want information on dates, names, places, or legal documents, ask Olga. Aunt Olga and I chat over the diminishing plate of cantaloupe. On the table Olga has spread out travel books and maps, none of them quite old enough to show the borders of the Czechoslovakia she grew up in. She has sketched in her Ruthenian homeland on the maps that stop at the eastern border of Slovakia. We locate cities on these maps as she reconstructs for me the journey they took after liberation.

"Your grandmother wanted to go home and look for the boys. I wanted to go home, too. Who wanted to sleep in the street with no bathroom facilities? I was under the impression that we'd find our brothers and Mother's parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins. You took any transportation you could. I remember we spent one night in Dresden. It was unbelievable there -- people coming from all over to a square surrounded by bombed out buildings. Our first train was another cattle car. We got on it. The Russians were being very careful because Germans were hiding among the survivors. We passed through an area with dark forests. That night, we lay on the floor to go to sleep. A Russian came by and stood in the door asking, 'Who speaks Russian?' Lenka and I popped our heads out -- 'We do!' -- and Mother pushed us down. The Russian

looked with a flashlight to see who was there. 'Only me, Babushka,' Mother said. She had heard that young girls were being raped.

"At the Czech border, we switched trains again. Czech soldiers immediately brought us food and drink. They asked us 'Who are you?' and 'Where are you going?' We ended up in Kromezice, a city in Czechoslovakia. We wanted to go farther east, but the tracks were bombed out. Here we met Russian soldiers, Jews, partisans. They told us, 'Don't go back there; there's nobody there.' We slept overnight at a convent. When the Czech Jewish partisans found out we were Jews, they were overjoyed. They thought all the Jews were killed, all the Jewish women were killed. They wanted to marry us, right away. One man proposed to me. 'I'm going to America,' I said. 'If you catch that butterfly, I'll marry you!' I didn't mean it, of course. I didn't even know the man."

"And did he chase the butterfly?"

"He did! But he didn't catch it. In Kromezice, we came upon a man, a NKVD agent. I don't know what the letters are, but that was the Russian Secret Police. He was in uniform, all dressed up. Mother knew him. He was my aunt Helen's friend. Mother wanted to know what was going on. She had heard rumors that that part of the country was about to be annexed to Russia. The man was a real Russian patriot. He wanted us to go back home. 'We can't. We want to meet my Dad and come to America,' we told him. He promised your mother and me *any* position we wanted in the Russian government if we go back. We said 'No.' Now Mother was afraid that if we went home, we would be stuck there. We turned around and went west, back to Prague.

Escaping the Iron Curtain

"We made it back to Prague." Mother looked at me above the chocolate chip cookies. "Every day, we went to a central spot, hoping to find someone who had news of my brothers. We did not plan to go home anymore because we heard that the borders might be closed, and we didn't want to be trapped there. Notes were posted everywhere; no one dared to take them down. People kept arriving. Finally, I met a classmate who had been with Erno and Tibi. He told me that my brothers had stayed with my friend, the auto mechanic, whom I had met in the ghetto. He helped them to survive up until the time of the deathmarch. This classmate had gotten sick on the march and had fallen behind the others. Everyone who was healthy enough to go on the march was shot. Erno and Tibi had been healthy. I asked my classmate how my brothers had been in the camps. He said, 'Tibi was OK, but about Erno, don't ask.'

"Now Olga became ill. She was hospitalized in Prague with pneumonia and mumps. Suddenly, the Russians were putting pressure on everyone to go home. To get food, you had to have a special permit, but you couldn't get the permit unless you had identification papers saying you belonged in Prague. We had no papers, so we decided to make our way back through the border to the American zone. But we couldn't go without Olga, and she didn't have permission to leave the hospital. When it got dark, we sneaked into Olga's room and kidnapped her from the hospital. By then, I had met another friend, Leon Landau, who agreed to help us get across the border. He had special papers for us, some in Russian for the Americans to read, and some in English for the Russians to look at. He knew only two words of English: Go, go! We went

across the border by train, and whenever a train official came near us, he shouted, "Go, go!" at them in English. That's how we made it back into Germany as the borders were closing for good."

"Didn't it bother you to be back in Germany?"

"I looked at it as America, because it was the American zone."

Aunt Olga's Travelogue, Part II

"In Prague, I came down with the mumps and was not permitted to be out in public. They took me to the hospital. Mother and Lenka stayed in a hotel close by. There was no money involved; nobody had money. The Czechs were very kind. If you wanted food, you got food. I stayed in the hospital for three weeks. They couldn't get the swelling from the mumps down. My doctor was a young, Jewish man. I couldn't stand being locked up, and he made the nurses give back my clothing. I promised I would not go anyplace, just outside of the building, and I would come back when I had to. That's how I saw Prague. We walked and saw the sights: the famous bridge with sculptures on it, the cross with Hebrew writing on it, the oldest synagogue in Europe, where the Golem was supposed to have been created.

"Then an order came. The Czech government was out of food, everything. They decided that they had to repatriate. Now you had to have ration cards to get the food. They tried to make people from all over the world go home. Meantime, I'm in the hospital. Mother and Lenka were very upset. They had to go for papers in a special office, and if you went there, you could

be detained and put on a train to take you back to the country you came from. If they go for papers, it's possible that they wouldn't come back. I talked to the doctor. Your mother had met someone who would help us get to the American zone, but the doctor wouldn't let me go. I said, 'Look. We have not been separated the whole war. I'm not going to be separated now.' He offered his house for Mother and Lenka to stay in while I was in the hospital. He liked me and felt that I was too sick to leave. But Mother said, 'So, how long could he keep me there? We want to go to America, look for Erno and Tibi, and look for Father.' So the doctor signed me out, legally. He made me promise to be tested when we got back to America."

"How did you feel?"

"Oh, great! as long as there were no wires around me. I just couldn't take the confinement of the hospital."

"Did you have any fears about the future?"

"I don't think we could project that far. I was anxious to see my dad and sisters. A friend of your mother's helped to get us out of the Russian zone and into Pilsen by train. If the Russians came, he would say, "Go! Go, go, go!" We called him Go-go. He gave us American papers to give to the Russian soldiers, and Russian papers for the Americans. While we were still in the Russian zone, we bumped into the NKVD again. This guy sees Mother and us and he says, 'What are you doing here? I thought I gave you instructions and directions to go home. Mother said, 'Look, I'm going to America to my husband. Don't try to stop me.'"

"In Pilsen, we met the Jewish Brigade, who were collecting young Jews to go to Palestine. Everyone was signing up, illegally. They tried to get us to join them. -- Oh look! Look out the window at that bush!"

Aunt Olga broke the thread of her narrative to direct my attention toward her garden where a large, yellow butterfly balanced on a cluster of leaves.

"That butterfly is like the one that I asked that man to chase, the one who wanted to marry me."

The UNRRA Camp

Mom points a chocolate-chip cookie at me.

"Back in Germany, in the American zone, we came to an UNRRA camp, a special camp for refugees run by United Nations. But we were not comfortable there, because it didn't just have Jewish refugees, but former Nazis and Hungarian Arrow Cross. We came to a large dormitory where we were supposed to sleep, but there we found big feet and little feet, and in the next bed, big feet and little feet, all peeping out from under the blankets. Mother immediately demanded a private room for all of us, who knows how. She didn't speak English, she didn't speak German. There was no such thing as a private room, but she got one!

"After a few days, we heard someone going by in a jeep yelling, 'Berkovic! Berkovic!' Mother decided, 'Well, we're Berkovics. Let's go and see what he wants.' The man was overjoyed to find some Berkovics. He gave us chocolate, chewing gum, and candy from his pockets. Mother said, "Alright, children, eat the chocolate first and eat it fast. He'll find out that we're the wrong Berkovics and want it back." It turned out that Mother's nephew, Alan

Berkovic, a captain in the American army, was looking for his mother and sister. Alan's major had promised him that he would send someone to look for his relatives everyday in the UNRRA camps, and he did. We were the wrong Berkovics, but we were still family. It turned out that Alan's mother was killed in the camps. His sister survived, but after liberation, she went to a party with some American soldiers in Sweden. They took a shortcut to the party over a frozen lake; the car broke through the ice, and they all drowned.

"Even after the Americans found out that we were the wrong Berkovics, they still treated us royally. They threw a party in our honor with kosher foods. They even showed us the labels. Honestly, I didn't care by then if the food was kosher. They also gave us fruit juice. I had never had juice before, and I was afraid that it might be alcoholic, but everyone said, 'Taste it, taste it!' and I did. That was the first time I tasted juice.

"We were unhappy in the UNRRA camp. So we decided to go to Palestine. An open truck arrived to take us. We went in this truck as far as the train station. Then at the last minute, Mother decided that Palestine would take us farther from Father. So, after the truck dropped off the group going to Palestine at the station, we went back again to the UNRRA camp. The road circled back and dipped down below the train station, and as we passed by, Leon Landau threw a package into the truck for me. The truck was still crowded and the ride was bumpy, but when I could get to the package, I found that it contained money for us.

"I had really wanted to go to Palestine," Mom tells me. "I pushed for it. It wasn't the 'stinking Jordan'; it was the most beautiful place in the world."

"What about seeing your family again?"

"I didn't care! I didn't care!"

"Were you disappointed at not going?"

"Very. I remember crying, but I didn't show my disappointment to Mother. I felt that Dad had protected his own skin and left me behind. I wasn't close to my sisters Ilona and Margi. We always fought, and they always won. I had only known them for about seven years. For two of those years I was away from home, and for another two they were away, so I didn't feel close to them. They had always wanted to play house and have me be the baby that got spanked. My brothers played monsters. I liked that more. We looked for ghosts and monsters and evil spirits in the cemetery.

Paris

"We travelled with the Americans all the way to Paris. We rode in a jeep with a French commander who was with the Americans and whose family had been killed by the Nazis. As we rode he took a certain pleasure in sideswiping any car whose occupants he thought might be Nazis. He pushed them off the road. I remember spending one night sleeping in a jail, because he didn't trust the Germans. Can you imagine, all those Americans traveling to Paris, and just two girls! When we reached the border of France, the Americans gave us each a glass of wine and some bread.

"In Paris, we were finally able to contact Father and send him an address where we could be reached. We had sent letters all along, but we never stayed in one place long enough to receive his answers."

"How did you know his address?"

"Olga had memorized it. We borrowed money from the Jewish agency, and later we were able to pay it back once Father sent us a check. The Americans had put us into a hotel, but now we moved into a house run by Rothchild for refugees, four bis Rue de Rosiere -- that was the address. This was in the red light district, but nobody ever bothered us. There was always food for us prepared. I had coffee in a little cup with no handle. Wine was served with every meal. I had plenty of food, as much as I wanted. It was food, and all of it was edible -- thick, edible, and as much as we wanted. Again there was a large room with lots of beds, girls and boys together. The next thing we know, Mother located a private room for us with a door we could close off.

"While we were here, I met a very young Jewish boy, smaller than Tibi, about five or six, or maybe a very small eight-year-old, who had managed to survive. He didn't know his own name. I never heard him speak a word. Nobody knew what country he was from. I had a camera with me that I had taken from the biggest factory you ever saw, outside of Waldenburg. With my shoes on, I climbed on all the cameras in a big pile until I found one that looked like my brother's. I was still hoping to find him alive. I never used it; I never took a picture. I felt that I had something that didn't belong to me. When I saw the little boy who didn't know his name, I said, 'You take it with you. You take it to Israel.' I gave that boy the camera I had taken for Erno."

Who Survived?

"Aunt Olga, how did you discover who from the family had survived?"

"By word of mouth. Mother kept asking. I thought she was crazy. That was like trying to find a needle in a haystack, but it worked. Once in Paris when she met someone from Antwerp, she asked if he knew her brother, Sam, who was also in Belgium. The man said, 'I know him.' They served in the Belgium underground together. This man sent word to Uncle Sam, and he immediately came to Paris to see us. Belgium honored him for his work in the underground and paid him a pension. Zicherman was his last name.

"We found out about Aunt Tubi another way. In Paris, we met a man from Tubi's home town, Szard, who told my Mother that Tubi was alive. This man was in touch with my Aunt Frieda in Budapest, and Frieda had already corresponded with Tubi. I loved Tubi. She had given me that little potato when I was sick in the camp, and I'll never forget it. We wrote to Tubi, and she told us that nobody survived at home. Erno and Tibi never made it back. Father's brother, Sandor, we didn't hear from for a long time. He had tried to get out of Czechoslovakia and was caught on the border by the Russians. He spent years in a Siberian jail. Such a fear was in him that he would never, ever write to Dad in America. His wife wrote instead."

"Your cousin, Robin, found out last summer what happened to Mother's sister, Herminke. [Robin is Olga's daughter.] We knew that Herminke had been taken to Teresin, but we didn't know what had happened to her from there. When Robin visited Czechoslovakia last summer, she went to Teresin and looked up the transport records. I have a xerox here of what she found. Look. On April 18, 1942, Aunt Herminke was taken to Sobibor with 923 other people on transport number Ap-758. In Sobibor, they killed everyone. Her name is recorded, too, at the Pincus synagogue in Prague. Outside of the synagogue stands a monument shaped like a willow

tree, with silver leaves. On each leaf is the name of one Holocaust victim. Her name is there: Hermina Dvorakova."

Henja

One of the biggest shocks of the war for my mother happened several years after the war, and concerned a young man she had met in Paris.

"Our new building on Rue de Rosiere was filled with Jewish refugees, almost all young and unattached, except for Olga and me: we were attached to Mother. Once a Texan asked me for a date. I said, Sure, I would like to come, but I had to take my sister with me. He said that was fine, he had a friend that she could date. Then I told him, good, but my sister couldn't come without my mother. He said, 'Don't you have a dog and a cat you can bring, too?' Mother always came with us on every date.

"In Paris, Mother met the son of one of her friends. She and the friend had promised each other that if they had a boy and a girl, they would marry them to each other. Now here was the son. He survived, and he wanted Mother to keep her promise. He wanted to marry me, and tagged along on all my dates. Eventually, I managed to drive him off.

"Everybody was running around trying to get married. When people found out that they had nobody, they wanted somebody. Perhaps there was a great fear that not enough Jewish women survived to marry. There was nobody older than us, and nobody younger. All the men, from forty to fourteen wanted to marry. They saw that Mother had two young girls, intact.

Mother was determined to bring us here, single. In almost every city, somebody came, approached Mother, and proposed to me or Olga. Mother always said no. Then we got on the train and left. Everybody wanted to have a wife, to have someone.

"While I was in Paris, I met a man named Henja, very serious, very, very good looking. He, too, lived in a building for refugees, but not the same one where we lived. He was older than I, about thirty or thirty-two, and he claimed to be an aeronautics engineer. He was dark complectioned, like Lawrence Olivier, and he had one distinguishing mark, a tiny cut on his lip. I had a crush on him. At the time, I was also dating a boy named Henri Sokolov, a survivor of Flossenburg concentration camp. Henja said, 'Lenka, you have to choose. If you choose Henri, I'll walk away. If you choose me, he has to walk away.' I chose Henja. Henri left and joined the French Foreign Legion.

"Henja wanted to elope with me, but I just couldn't. Mother began to distrust him. She said that all he wants is a passport to the United States. But I knew that he wanted me to stay in France with him. Mother forbade me to see him anymore, so he started a correspondence, and kept on trying to convince me to elope. When it was finally time for us to leave Paris, I sent Henja a note, and he turned up at the train station. One more time, he tried to convince me to stay. He asked me to come across the street with him for coffee. He ordered champaign for us and asked me to elope with him to the south of France. I would not. I wanted both parents at my wedding. Then he offered to marry me now, and follow me to the United States later. Mother said no.

"Once I arrived in the States, I wrote to him. For a while, I refused to go out with anyone else, but I never heard from him again. Why didn't he respond if he really likes me? I wondered.

It never dawned on me that he had left Paris. He was older, mature, and very, very nice. I saved his picture and all his love letters. His letters would start: Mein Liebest Kind (My Dearest Child). Clearly, he looked upon me as a child. I only understood half of what he wrote. So I took it to Lisa, my friend on Sydenham Street, to translate."

"Oh, my God," she said, "I've never seen such love letters! I don't have the words for you in English to translate it."

"Years later, we saw his face again, on the front of the New York Times. You were a little girl at the time. I was very upset. I took the article with me to Olga's. 'Who's that, Olga?' I asked. 'That's Henja!" Olga and I pulled out our old photos of him and compared. It was the same man. But his name wasn't really Henja, it was Hans, and his last name was Hefelmann. Hans Hefelmann wasn't an aeronautics engineer; he was a doctor who had been involved in the early euthanasia program in Nazi Germany. They caught up with him in South America. The New York Times article said that he had been with the survivors, pretending to be a survivor."

"How did you feel when you found out who he really was?"

"I felt sick."

The "euthanasia" program in Germany began with the decision to kill children who would otherwise live to be a drain on society. Idiots, the mentally ill, and the deformed were particularly targeted. Robert Jay Lifton, in The Nazi Doctors, reports that Hitler was personally involved with the decision to run the euthanasia program, and that it was to be done secretly:

And for that purpose an organization was created: the Reich Committee for the Scientific Registration of Serious Hereditary and Congenital Diseases . . . . The name conveyed the sense of a formidable medical-scientific registry board, although its leader, Hans Hefelmann, had his degree in agricultural economics. (52)

Proposals

"So, Grandmother, your daughters had lots of proposals after liberation."

"They had proposals. American soldiers came and wanted to take them on dates, but they couldn't take them unless I went with them, too. The whole family went. In America I said to Papa, 'I saved the girls. Till now, I take care of them. Now you take care of them.' It was a mixed up world, and all the boys wanted to go to America. They think that America is from gold the streets. They think that you do not have to work, but you have to work. The boys think that Papa is in America, and he must be a millionaire, so they want to come, too."

"Do you remember any of the boys?"

"No, but I'm sure I don't like them. I don't want to bring someone for Papa, so he has to work for strangers. It's common sense. Why should he support strange people? I knew what I was doing."

"Grandmother, why were people in such a rush to get married?"

"After the war, you had people who had had a very strict life: they didn't have what to wear, they didn't have what to eat, they didn't have what to do. They had no freedom. Now they want to eat, they want to dance, they want to love, and I was in the way."

Passports

Over the nearly empty plate of cantaloupe, Aunt Olga hands me her passport from Czechoslovakia. Its cover is of thick, gray paper, and inside, a black and white photograph of Olga shows a striking young woman with wavy, chin-length hair in three-quarters profile. The passport is dated August 13, 1945 and expired on the twelfth of February, 1946, only six months later.

"The area where we came from in Czechoslovakia had legally become Russia," Olga explains. "We were already in Paris, and by now we had written to Dad and he was getting the papers ready for immigration, but we needed passports. We went to the Czech consulate and he said he could not issue passports to us legally; we had to go to the Russian consulate. Mother said, 'But the Russian consulate won't give us any.' The Russians wanted everybody to go home and stay in Russia. The Czech consul said, 'Come back later.' The law that made our area Russia instead of Czechoslovakia had gone into effect that very day. He said, 'Come back when it's late.' We came back after working hours. The consul was there himself and made up Czech passports for the three of us, but only for six months. It expired in February and could not be renewed. We

had to renounce our Czech citizenship for him to issue the passports, so we did. But that put a lot of pressure on us. We had to be out of the country within six months."

The Hat

"Mom, how long were you in Paris?"

"Let's see. We were liberated in April. Then we wandered about for three or four weeks. We were in Paris from May until December -- six months of doing nothing. Once I said, 'Mother, why didn't you send us to school? We could have learned French; we could have had a head start on English!' She said, 'I don't know.' We saw all the highlights, whatever we could walk to. I went to the Louvre every day, for free. We saw the Follies Bergere with all the dancers covered in petals. By the end of the dance, all the petals were flying. Eventually, Father sent us money, and when it was time to leave, we were not permitted to take it with us. We had to spend it all. Mother bought some perfume. And Olga and I bought gorgeous hats."

Mom and I begin to laugh. I know all about the hat. I've been looking for one like it for years, but there doesn't seem to be another such in all the world.

"Okay, Mom, describe the hat!"

"The hat was big, a big broad rim, but not as big as the bird on it, a stretched-out bird made of white feathers, and lots of flowers and nets everywhere."

"No cherries?"

"Maybe cherries, too. Maybe even a bush on it. Everything was on that hat! I *loved* that hat!"

"What happened to it?"

"As soon as Margi and Ilona saw it, they threw my beautiful Parisian hat into the ocean. Then they put lipstick on me, right away."

Crossing the Ocean

"Father had sent us money and boat tickets to come to the States. He got the first tickets that he could, on a ship called the Magellanes. The war had just ended. Not many boats were crossing the Atlantic yet. Tickets were expensive, about $1,400 each. Once again, we had our own private room. The ship started at Spain and stopped at Curasao, Tenereif, the Canary Islands, and Havannah before docking in New York. The ship carried passengers, but also cargo. Two fires broke out while we were traveling, one of them bad, but they managed to put them both out.

Most of the passengers on this ship were Spanish, the Spanish elite. I had one boyfriend there who was Spanish. His name was Immanuel Pardo. We could communicate in German. One day, he came up to me and asked, 'Why didn't I see you in Mass?' 'You're not going to see me in Mass.' 'Why not?' 'Because I'm Jewish.' His face transformed in horror. He had never met a Jew before. 'I didn't know that a Jew could look like *that*,' he said.

"When we arrived in Havannah, another young man wanted to date me. Mother said 'yes' at first, then she changed her mind. For the first time, I went against my mother's wishes and went with my date to a bar. I was miserable! I made the young man take me back. We headed

back toward the boat. There on the top of the boat, on the lookout tower, *there* was Mother! Even from the distance, I could recognize the shape. I knew it was mother!

Grandmother Dines on a Ship

For Grandmother, the ship was a time to look back and look forward.

"We could not eat with a spoon or a fork, the hands were so shaking. On the ship, I was ashamed, I could not eat with a spoon and fork. We want to eat, but we don't know how to eat. We waited until the others had left. I decided, on the ship, that if I am living, I want to keep the Jewish things what I am able to keep. I keep kosher."

The Birds

"Do you want to hear about the birds?" Mom asks. "Olga and I were bored. Mother sat on a chair and we would walk around on the deck. One day, we followed some steps down and down into the hull of the ship. There we found birds in beautiful hand-made cages -- yellow birds, small -- perhaps canaries. Merchants were going to sell these birds in the States. I set all the birds free. I just couldn't bear to see them in captivity. In the middle of the night, I got up. Olga came with me, but she cried, 'No, no, you must not do it!' I sneaked over to the cages and opened

them all. All the birds flew away. The next morning, such a chaos! Everyone was accusing everyone else of doing it. I hid in my room."

New York Harbor

"Our ship for America left from Bilbao in Spain," Olga told me. "It took four weeks to cross the ocean. Two fires broke out while we were aboard. The second was really hard to put out. They asked everyone to come up on deck and into lifejackets. One lady ran to get her fur coats and put them on. Lenka and I laughed. 'My God! The fish are going to have a hard time getting to her!'

"Arriving in New York Harbor -- *that* was exciting. We got there on January first, 1946, but nobody was permitted to get off the boat until January second. The view and the sight was breathtaking. It was cold. We spent the entire night on deck. It was the most beautiful sight you ever can see. We saw the Statue of Liberty, and behind it, New York, all lit up with Christmas lights. It was the first holiday after the war when New York was permitted to light up. I watched the lights and I wondered, 'Are we going to recognize my sisters and my dad?' Then I spotted Margi and Ilona from on board. Arriving here was an exciting, nice, great, indescribable feeling."

Part VII: Crossing the Abyss

The Baby

"Do you think of Auschwitz often?" I ask my mother.

"Every Day."

Every day? This I had never known about my mother. I never knew that she could be standing right next to me and yet vanish in an instant to another world.

"What kinds of things make you think about it."

"Simple things. Bread. Children. And then it's as if the memories stop the normal clock of the present and set another one running, far in the past."

* * *

"After liberation, the shock of hearing a baby cry for the first time was enormous. We hadn't heard a baby cry in so long. It was a German baby, being wheeled in its carriage by its mother as we survivors searched the town for food. And then we realized that there are no more babies among us. We had heard a rumor that all our babies are dead. I heard the German baby cry and I felt like . . . like this baby has no right to live. Survivors surrounded the carriage. I was right at the front, trying to get at that baby. I wanted to strangle it. But Mother wouldn't let me."

"How did Grandmom stop you?"

"She sat on me." (We laugh.)

"And why did she stop you?'

"She said, 'Jews don't do that.'"

Grandmother, too, remembers the German baby.

"One day I looked and Lenka and Olga were not there. When I found them, they had caught a little German child. Lenka was so angry. 'What do you want to do with the baby?' I asked. 'They killed our brothers, and we will kill this baby.' I would not let them. I said, 'God did not free us so we could kill.'" Grandmother lifts her chin and says, "I would not let them touch the baby."

I am drawn to this story. Rage seems a pure and proper response to the murder of one and a half million Jewish children. Rage can be fed, it can be blocked, but what allows it to die off? What allows the earth to be green again? Or is it ever green again? Mother tells the story of the baby (as all her others) calmly, with laughter. Today, I am aware of the abyss between that rage and this laughter, and I wonder what it takes to cross that abyss.

Sweet Sixteen

"After the war, Mother gave us back the year we lost. She made me fifteen again, and Olga sixteen. Those were our ages on all the official papers we filled in at the American consulate."

I do some calculations and realize that my mother was sixteen for three years. She was "sixteen" while she was really fifteen, in Auschwitz; then during her sixteenth year, she was given back a year and became fifteen again. She had to say she was sixteen once more, the next year, when she turned seventeen in fact.

Grandmother had lost her home, her property, her social standing, her language, her friends, her homeland, her parents, her sisters and brothers, her two beloved sons. She was through with loss and ready to rebuild. She began by returning to her daughters what little she could: one lost year of childhood.

Hunting for the Boys

"In Prague, I looked for my sons, Erno and Tibi. Every day there were transports coming, and I went to see, had anybody news about them. I asked the young kids there, 'Do you know an Erno Berkovic from Vrbovets? a Tibor Berkovic?' I went every day, asking. Finally, I heard some boys saying, 'Run, here comes the crazy lady.' I thought, 'If they think I'm crazy, I must be crazy,' so I stopped asking.

"When we came to the States, we arrived by boat in New York Harbor with the other refugees. There was, waiting, Sam, my brother; my husband Adolf; my daughters, Margi and Ilona. I was not coming out. Everybody was out of the ship. I don't come out. I think, 'As long as I stay in the ship, maybe I will still find my boys.'"

Grandmother gives a look that translates roughly, 'So what do you think of that?' Then she continues, wistfully, "Sometimes, I think so they are still living some place, that they came to the United States. But where they are . . . I don't know."

In America, Grandmother continued to look for the boys.

"In the streets, when I saw someone my kids' age, I inquired if they knew something about them. I went to Central High School, where was lots of boys, and looked. Once I got a phone call to go to Franklin Street. There was a gentleman. He spoke Yiddish. He wanted to take from me the money. He said for fifty dollars, he'll give me the name of people who know where my sons were. Fifty dollars was then a lot of money. Leon, Lenka's husband, made twenty dollars a week at that time. I did not know, then, that people prey on somebody else's problems. The family explained me this, and I did not go more to Franklin Street."

My parents, Leon and Lenka, married three years after the Holocaust. Three years after the Holocaust, Grandmother still walked about the streets here looking for her sons.

Sugar Shortage

"I was wiped out in Auschwitz," Mother tells me, "and wiped out a second time here. Traveling in Europe after liberation had been wonderful, but when we arrived here, I felt depressed, very low. We came on trash day, a windy windy trash day. When I first saw our new home, it looked like a palace to me, even though it was only a little old row home by American standards. But it didn't feel like home. My parents didn't seem to be happy. They had a lot to get over. I never saw them smiling or cheerful. Olga, Mother, and I had no language, no communication. No one in the family asked us anything about the Holocaust. I tried to speak about it once to one of my sisters, and she said, 'You know, dear, things were difficult here, too. Bread was day-old; butter was rationed. We had a sugar shortage.' No one wanted to hear anything about it. People said to me, 'What are you, a grouch? Smile. Don't be grouchy again.' People said, 'Forget about it. The best thing is to forget about it.' After that, I didn't want to speak.

I stopped talking for a year. I had had to learn so many languages that I didn't want to learn any more. Czech was my native language, but Yiddish was spoken by my parents. I had to learn Russian for school, then Hungarian and German. English seemed so ugly to me, especially the 'th.' You had to stick your tongue out to say it. I couldn't form one sentence that was intelligent, and I didn't want to speak. My teacher, Miss Ossler helped me after school with the 'th.' She was kind, but she was not my age. I had almost no friends here. All the American children seemed so silly and immature. I wondered, Why are they smiling? Didn't they know

what had happened? How could they smile? There was one kind girl who would talk to me, but she died of cancer. I didn't go to the funeral. I had had enough of death.

"Even the music here seemed silly to me. The most popular song on the radio was 'Chicory Chick.' Do you know the words? A woman's voice sang:

Chicory chick, cha lak cha la

Chicory romey in a bannanica

Balika, valika, can't you see?

Chicory chick is me.

What nonsense!

"The family was not the same anymore. My brothers were gone. My sisters had both been college-bound in Czechoslovakia. Here they worked in the sweatshops, like slaves, until they got married. They were school-age, but they never went back to school. My father had always seemed like such a big man to me. Here he was beaten down. While I was in Auschwitz, I dreamed that, whether I lived or died, my father would avenge me. He was in America getting ready to kill the Nazis if anything happened to us. 'My Dad will search you down and cut your throat,' I would say to myself. But when I came to America, I found a broken man, not the father I had left. Mother lost her status in the family. Before, she had been the mother of six children who had to listen to her. Here, Margi and Ilona had been working and earning their own money for seven years. They were Americans already; she was a greener. They gave her their paychecks, but they said that they were not going to take orders from her anymore.

"But worst of all, when I came to America, I had lost my identity one more time. My identity disappeared. It wasn't me anymore. Nobody looked at me and saw in me any quality that

was like me. I wasn't this and I wasn't that: I wasn't American yet. Once, the principal in our high school here praised me for being Americanized so quickly. I was offended. Why do I now have to be American to be good? What I was was not good enough; I had to be something else. I did not feel the praise he intended. Instead, I felt that he was wiping away what was good in me. Before, in Czechoslovakia, I never felt any complex about not being perfect."

"What was your conception of yourself?

"My conception of me was that I *was* perfect. I was self-assured and self-confident before. I was blonde, and that seemed to appeal to the Jewish boys. I'm sure that there were prettier girls than me around, but I was sure that I was the most beautiful! My parents never told me that I was pretty. In America, it's not that I wasn't perfect; I was nothing, a zero."

"When did you start feeling like you again?"

"When I fell in love with your Dad. I started to be very happy. I heard the music coming down the street, and I was happy. Your Dad had one of the first battery-operated radios. Mother would say, 'Lenka, come down! The music is coming!' Your father was very shy. He stood up for what he believed in. I liked him very much."

"Did you talk with Dad about the camps?"

"I did, but never in details, like I do with you. Just bits and pieces. Olga and I would make references to it, but Olga objected when I told you the stories. You told your cousins, Michele and Robin, and then she would have some explaining to do. I said, 'Whatever Gail's asking, she's ready to know.'"

Olga Comes Home

"What were my first impressions of America? Dirt and trash flying in every direction. Because of the holidays, they had not picked up the trash. Then I heard music -- Chicka-lee-chick -- and I thought, Oh, my God, that's the language we have to learn. We got to the United States, and we didn't know what English sounded like. People around us were talking so fast. I thought, God, we'll never, ever learn this language!

"We traveled from New York to Philadelphia by train, then by subway to Sydenham Street. Sydenham Street was coming home. I didn't just come to America, I came home. I've always felt happy being in this land. We were poor. Dad worked in a shop, and after that job, he had another, sewing slipcovers. He worked on evenings and Saturdays. Ilona got an office job. My sisters showed us around. Adjusting was not difficult. After Auschwitz, nothing was difficult. Just to be free to open a window and take a breath of air was enough. And if we could borrow a dress on Sunday that Ilona wouldn't wear until Tuesday, that was great. After Auschwitz, no task was unattainable. I felt you could survive on very little. Our outlook on life and what was important changed very much. Coming out of the war, I felt stronger in my identity. I didn't feel inferior.

"When I first had Michele, I realized what my Mom must have suffered. In the hospital I thought, 'Oh, my God, what my Mom must have felt, watching us suffer with no food and all kinds of dangers and not being able to do anything about it.'

"Even to this day, if I see young boys, I look. 'Gee, does he look like my brothers?' We never stopped searching, even to this day.

"Did you discuss what you had gone through with the rest of your family?

"When we first came to this country, we didn't talk about the Holocaust. Your mother would say she had a headache and didn't want to talk. When we did talk, I would have nightmares for two or three days."

"Did you talk to your father or sisters?"

"Not much. School started within two weeks. Margi and Ilona went to work, and Dad worked. He might have talked to my Mom, but not us. Nobody wanted to hear it. They were not interested in it."

No One Asks

"When you came to the States, Grandmom, did you talk about the Holocaust with your family?"

"Never. They never asked. Not even Papa. I was hurt. They didn't ask what was there, what was done to us. They didn't ask, and I didn't have anything in me to offer. Not Ilona, not Margi, not Papa. 'You suffered, that's your business.' I felt a stranger in my own family. How would you feel if they killed your sisters, and no one asked even one question? So I told nothing. For nobody.

"Didn't Grandpop even ask about the boys?"

"Yes, he asked where are the boys. 'I don't know. The Germans killed them.' They don't ask; they were not sorry. I feel they would cry if they were sorry, but they don't ask. How would

you feel if you were in an accident, and no one asked anything? They handled me as if I was a stepmother.

The Question Test

I think about the failure to ask questions. Then, as I prepare to teach a course on Arthurian Literature for the Fall semester, I come across a passage from the medieval German romance, Parzival, by Wolfram von Eschenbach. In it, the knight, Parzival, comes to the castle of his uncle, Anfortas, the Grail King, who has been grievously wounded by a poisoned spear and cannot heal. "His life," Wolfram tells us, "was but a dying." Sitting by the maimed king, Parzival joins the throngs who watch the rituals of the Grail Castle. Although Parzifal doesn't know it, his sense of compassion is being tested: without being prompted, he must ask a question.

> *There where sat many a valorous knight, Sorrow itself was borne into their presence. In through the door dashed a squire, bearing a lance in his hand. This rite sharpened their sorrow. Blood gushed from the point and ran down the shaft to the hand that bore it and on into the sleeve. And now there was weeping and wailing throughout the whole wide hall. The people of thirty lands could not have wept so many tears. (127)*

Parzival observes the pain and lamentation, but fails to ask a single question, and because of this failure of compassion, the king is not healed of his wound. Later in his wanderings, Parzival

meets his uncle, the hermit Trevrizent, who mourns the knight's silence without realizing that it had been Parzival.

> *"He saw the real sorrow and yet he did not say to his host, 'Sir, why is it you suffer so?" (259)*

Parzival has failed the question test.

Many years later, Parzival again returns to the Grail castle. Tearfully, he stands before his kinsman, King Anfortas, and asks, "Uncle, what is it that troubles you?" With these words, Anfortas recovers from his hurt and Parzival at last achieves the Holy Grail.

Questions help. Questions heal.

A Long Silence

"Gail, you'll never believe what I found out!"

"What did you find out, Mom?"

"I went out to dinner with my sisters and our husbands, and afterwards, we came back here for dessert. We talked, and Olga brought up the Holocaust. Then I said, 'I don't remember Dad leaving or kissing me or saying good-bye. Margi, Ili, you're older. Do you remember his saying good-bye?' They didn't. Then I said, 'You know, I don't remember *your* saying good-bye, either. It's like you just disappeared from my life.' There was no good-bye. They don't remember

why. Maybe Grandmother didn't want to spread the word that she was out of town seeing them off in Budapest. Maybe she didn't want people to know about their departure. I said, 'You were very young when you left home alone, two young girls, unable to speak the language. What was it like? It must have been very hard for you.' Ilona looked at Margi and Margi looked at Ilona. Then Ili said, "You know, you and Olga discuss the Holocaust all the time, but we never, ever talked about it." They never discussed how it felt leaving home.

"They told us how scared they were when they had to catch the boat in Italy for America. They barely made it. Mother had told them what time to go, but they couldn't find the boat and they couldn't speak the language. They described the dresses they were wearing that day. They were dressed like princesses, hats matching the outfit, gloves matching the outfit, and alone. Imagine what it feels like being alone. Maybe they felt as if Mother pushed them away, as if they hadn't had enough time with Mother. They suffered a terrible loneliness when they came here, and every penny had to be saved. to send to their mother and sisters. They had to sew piece-work, fast, fast, fast. Then they had to come home and start cooking for Father, and they didn't know how to cook. Mother had never let us into the kitchen at home. And Father was fussy. . They had only stale bread. There was so little money that Father shared a newspaper with another man, so each day, he saw only half a paper. They were hurting here terribly. It must have been so painful for them that they couldn't even talk about it -- until last month in my house."

Grandmother Builds a Home

Grandmother continues.

"Papa had here a friend, a girlfriend. I said, 'That is your friend; I want my own.' I came; I don't know the language. Who would be my friend? I came, and I was a built-in maid. I did everything when they came home from work -- but they never ask.

"I came here, and I didn't like it here, but I decided, I will make a home for myself. But how could I do that? I had four daughters to marry. I did not like anymore Papa, when he offered me to be a friend for his girlfriend. I told him, 'You be a friend. I will make for myself a home.' But that would be a shonde, a disgrace, so I don't do that. I thought, as soon as they are married, I leave him. But they got married, and I, after that, I forgot. I had the weddings, and I didn't invite the girlfriend. Papa was quiet. He didn't say one word. I tell you, Gail, maybe it was all innocent. Who knows? I didn't speak too good the language. I don't know the culture. Maybe I misunderstood . . .

"I wanted to come to America. I think I come to a family who would with open arms welcome me, and I came to strangers. How would you feel? We could go to Israel, and it would cost us nothing. But I think, 'Who do I have in Israel?' I want to come to America. I think my husband must be a rich man; I don't have to be a slave anymore. But I was a built-in maid. We felt not loved anymore.

"In Europe, you had to work, but you didn't have to be a slave, like here. I am for education. If you are educated, you don't have to be a slave, a factory worker. Reading helped a

lot during the war. I never went to college, but I read a lot. I read a lot, and I learned everything, and I lived. If you read, you learn everytime something. I was very surprised when I came here that Margi and Ilona did not go in school. They knew my philosophy. Here Papa worked like a slave. I cooked for him everytime specialties. When he came home from work, he could not sit down and eat right away; he had to rest. I said, 'Sit down and eat.' He said, 'I worked a whole day. Now I have plenty time. Let me rest.'

"Yes, Gail, it was lots of problems, and it was not easy to adjust here, too. It was very hard. I wanted to make money. The A&P started to sell kosher chicken, and I think, 'I will work there with the chickens, clean them, cut them up.' I think, 'Three are working, and they support six.' I tried everything, but I couldn't do the language. I want to work very badly.

"My parents let me go in schools, in Jewish schools, and I knew to read the Jewish paper, and here was a job, some job that I could do, a factory job. I go to the factory. I dressed myself up and found out how to go there. It was a sweater factory, and they take me in. In Europe, they do not say 'Esther.' That was for the maid. There, there was honoring. Here, they took me in the factory, and they said, 'Esther.' That was so new for me.

"I came home and Papa said, 'Esther, where you was?' 'I have a job.' Papa said, 'You don't have a job; you have here a job. If you go to work, this way I have to stay home to cook and clean.' I stayed home.

"I tried night school classes. But at night I was tired. I was cooking, I cleaned, I washed, I scrubbed. I was the maid, and already I was too tired to do anything."

"Are you still angry?"

"No, that was a long time ago."

"Was it hard to learn English, Grandmother?

"I don't know. I don't learn too much English."

Eventually, they did adjust to life in America. Mom broke the law that says, "The eldest daughters shall marry first." She married second after Ilona. Her parents told her that if she married out of order, she would have only a small wedding, not a fine wedding in a synagogue. She chose a modest wedding in her parents' house on Sydenham Street. The remaining sisters married shortly afterwards. Grandfather opened up his own business as a tailor and dry cleaner. Grandmother helped in the store. She now has nine grandchildren and fourteen great-grandchildren. Mom regained her maddeningly cheerful disposition.

"How can you be so happy?" I once asked her.

"I get up each morning, and I'm alive!"

Grandfather's Death

Grandfather died when he was eighty-seven, nearly eighty-eight.

"Up to eighty-five is a normal life," he explained to me one day as I sat by him on the couch in his two-room apartment. His leg had been amputated, and it was hard for him to get up. "If you die before eighty-five, it's a curse, but every year after that is a blessing."

He was a tall man for his time. Now his circulation wouldn't reach his feet. He stuffed cotton between his toes to ease the pressure. Grandmother went out and bought the softest,

lightest lamb's wool quilt to cover his feet, but even that was too heavy. Something odd happened to his right eyelid. It wouldn't stay up, and Grandpop used a small piece of tape to keep it open. His medicine made him grumpy. One day, my cousin Robin and I visited him unannounced, a frequent enough occurrence. He growled at us.

"How dare you come here like this. Do you see this old woman here? How can you shame her like this! She has nothing to offer you, nothing but some ferstunkene lettuce."

"Fine," I thought. "You don't want us to visit, we won't visit."

During our next visit, Grandpop, in tears, apologized. He had decided never to take that medicine again. (Instead, he fed the remaining pills to his African violets, which continued to flourish despite the medication.)

The leg grew worse, and he was hospitalized. First they amputated his leg below the knee, then above. In the hospital, he began to rave in Hungarian. He is weeping and yelling and will not be quieted. Frantic nurses run to fetch my mother.

"What is he saying?" the nurses ask.

"He is saying, 'What have you Nazis done to my leg? What have you done to my sons? Why have you taken my sons?'"

After the funeral, my grandmother, dressed in black with a black kerchief tied on her head, looked so small at the edge of the open grave. Above us, at the very top of a tree, a sweet mocking bird came to sing.

Did you know?

"Before father died," Mom says, "I asked him, 'Dad, did you know they were killing us? Did you know they were killing the Jews?' 'I knew.'

A Dream

It is a chilly, wet April. Grandmother is ninety-nine years old. Mom calls to tell me that Grandmother is feeling good today, good enough to think about planning her one-hundredth birthday party, still five months away. (Feeling ill, she had refused to celebrate her ninety-ninth.) Then:

"Grandmother had a dream last night."

"What did she dream?"

"She dreamed about the boys. She dreamed she was still hoping that the boys are alive."

Postscript

Grandmother did celebrate her hundredth birthday and lived six months beyond that date. About two months before she died, we spoke. In Jewish tradition, one's departed ancestors can come to you in dreams to give warnings or advice. I was curious.

"So Grandmother, what do you hear from Grandfather?" I asked her during one of our phone calls.

"I don't talk to dead people."

One month before her death, we spoke again.

"Gail, last night, I had a dream."

"What did you dream, Grandmother?"

"I dreamed that your grandfather came to visit me, and he looked . . . exactly how usual. The same clothes, exactly, how he wore every day."

"What did he say?"

"I said, 'Go away! I am not ready to go with you.'"

"Good! You stay here."

"I try."

Two days before her stroke, I spoke to Grandmother again, our last long phone call.

"Do you want to learn the secret of living to be a hundred?" Herring! Eat every day a herring. And griebelach! Eat griebelach."

"I love griebelach."

"Your mother won't let me eat it."

"Are you going to the bar mitzvah?"

"Margie and Ilona brought me some dresses, and I picked one out."

"Good. Then I'll see you there in about five weeks."

"I don't know. I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know."

"At night, I can't breathe lying down. I can't sleep."

"Can you sleep sitting in the reclining chair?"

"What kind of a life is it, to sit all day in a chair, and sit there all night, too."

"Try to come."

"I try."

She was not able to attend the bar mitzvah. Two days after our phone call, in early March of 2000, she suffered a stroke and was hospitalized for two weeks, paralyzed on one side and unable to swallow. Her grasp was still strong, and although articulating was difficult, she remained mentally clear during this period and was able to communicate. Shortly before she died, Lenka tried to comfort her, saying, "Mother, the hospital is doing everything for you they can do. All your children are here around you." "Not all," Grandmother said, and up her hand with two fingers raised. Two children were missing.

Esther Berkovic died on March 15, 2000. According to the Jewish calendar, which counts the day as starting from the night before, she and my grandfather died on the same day, the eighth of Adar, sixteen years apart.

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Front row: Esther Berkovic's parents, Malech and Etta Zicherman
Second row: Esther's sisters Herminka and Gizi with their husbands.

Esther's sisters and brother. Seated behind the table, from left to right: Herminka, Gizi, unkown man, Zenka, and Helen.. The man behind Helen on the right is Esther's brother, Mortche. (The man to the rear on the left is unknown.) Seated in front of the table, from left to right: Frieda, Naftula (Helen's son), Ilona (Esther's daughter), and Tubi.

Esther Zicherman Berkovic, age 16.

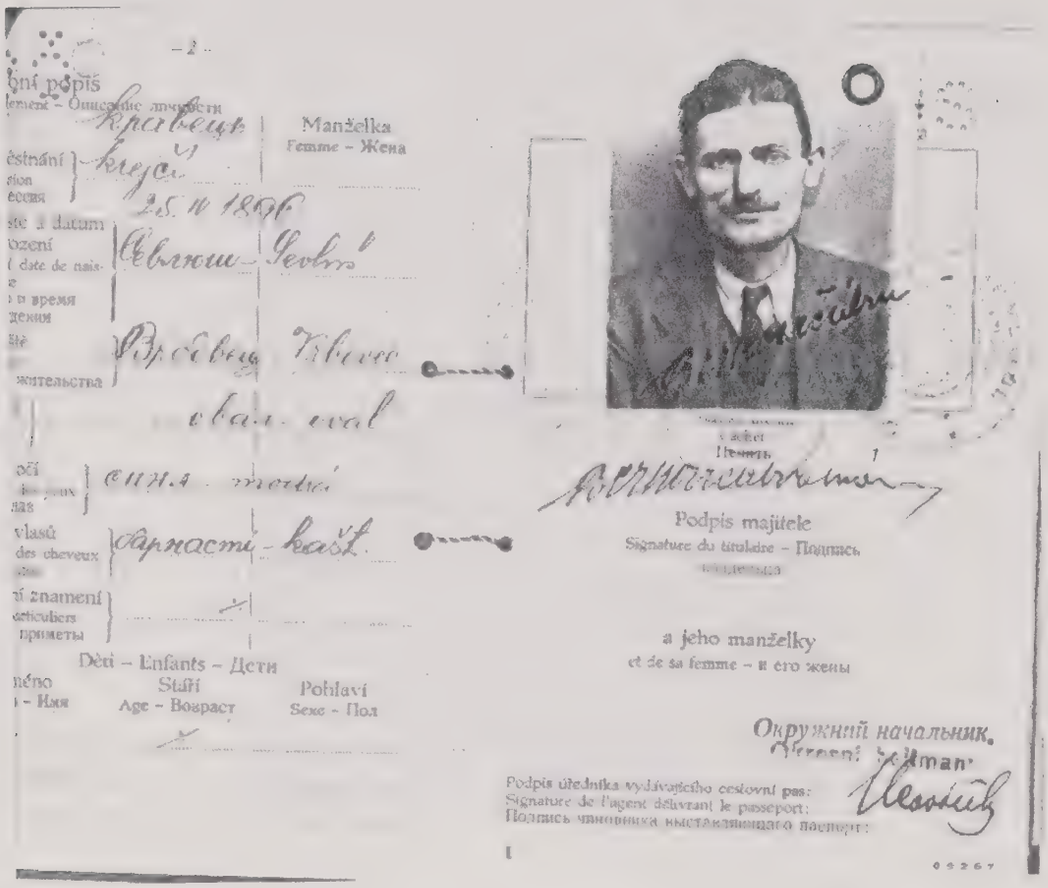
Adolph Berkovic

Verbovec Fire Brigade, 1935. Adolph Berkovic is seated in the second row, left, in the white pants. Next to him in the second row is his friend, Bundi, the father of the boy who wanted to kill all the stinking Jews. Seated in the center with a rounded hat is the minister, Bundi's father.

The Berkovic children. From left to right: Ilona, Margit, Olga, Lenka, Erno, Tibor

Tibi and his grandfather Martche Berkovic

A neighbor's house in Verbovec. From left to right: Erno with Sekfu, Lenka with her pet lamb, Esther, Margit, and Ilona holding a child who may be the minister's grandson. Front row: two neighbor's children. On porch: the woman in the middle is Mamma, the friend to whom Olga ran to find out what was happening when the family was rounded up for deportation.



Abrham Berkovic's passport photo. The passport was issued on January 30, 1939 in Sevlus, Czekoslovakia.

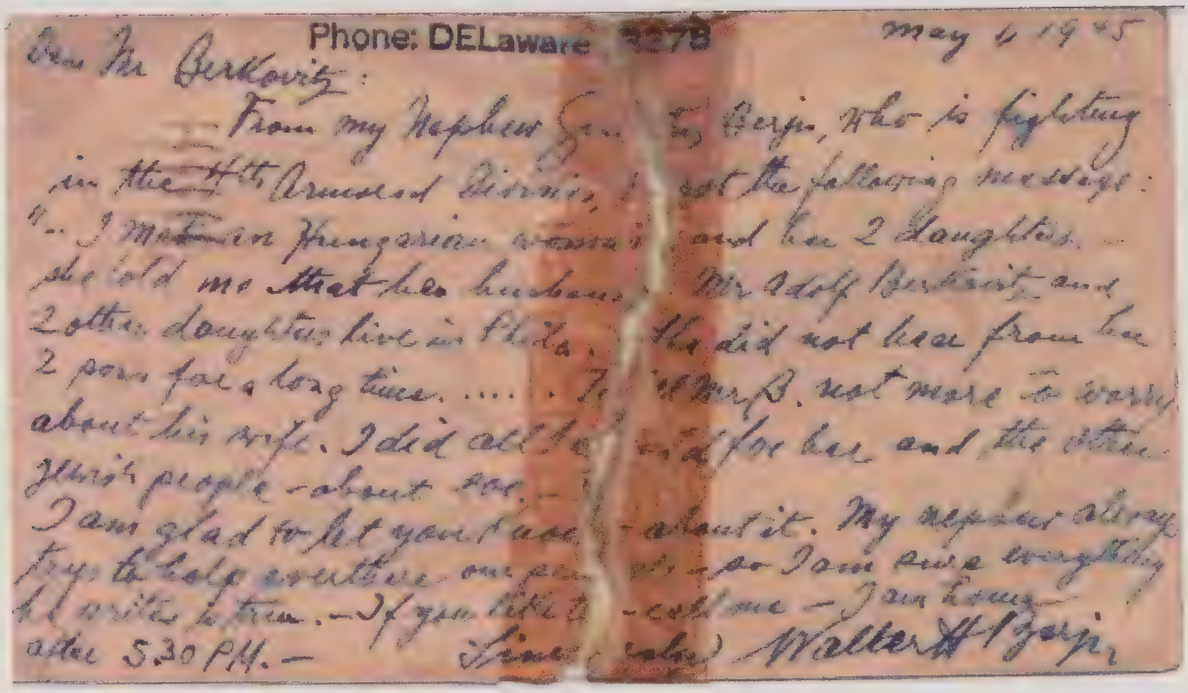
Esther and her sons, Erno and Tibi.

At home after a flood in Verbovec. From left to right: Lenka, Olga, Erno, Tibi, Esther, and the dog, Sekfu (Carnation).

Olga and Lenka in Paris six months after liberation.

Lenka in Paris after liberation.

In Paris after liberation. Olga, Lenka, and friends. The little boy in the doorway is the young survivor to whom Lenka gave Erno's camera.



Phone: DELaware 9278

May 4 1945

Dear Mr Berkovitz:

From my Nephew Sgt. Eric Berger, who is fighting in the 4th Armored Division, I got the following message: "I met an Hungarian woman and her 2 daughters. She told me that her husband, Mr Adolf Berkovitz and 2 other daughters live in Phila. She did not hear from her 2 son for a long time. ..... I met Mr B. not more to worry about his wife. I did all I could for her and the other Jewish people about me. I am glad to let you know about it. My nephew always try to help everyone and I am sure everything he writes is true. If you like to call me — I am home after 5.30 PM. — Sincerely (also) Walter H. Berger

Top: Postcard informing Adolf Berkovic that his wife and two daughters were alive. Bottom: Scrip for the canteen in Buchenwald, given to the family as a bonus for work in Altenburg.

Birkenau in 1998. Top: the gate to C-lager. Bottom: the remains of barrack 31, where the Berkovics stayed while in C-lager.

Birkenau 1998. Top: One of two buildings used for disinfection when slave laborers were transferred to a new camp. Bottom: "The room filled with stairs." Visible are the disassembled planks and bolts that formed the stairs. Bits of pipe are visible above the bottom step and at the bottom, right. The shot was taken through a window of the disinfection building.

The sisters at a family affair in Philadelphia. From left to right: Ilona, Margi, Lenka, and Olga.

Esther Berkovic at ninety-seven years of age.